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Report Documentation Page

1. REPORT DATE **2011**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **RAND Corporation,National Defense Research Institute,1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138,Santa Monica,CA,90407-2138**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**118**	

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Israel and Iran

A Dangerous Rivalry

Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader, Parisa Roshan

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Preface

Israel and Iran have come to view each other over the past decade as direct regional rivals, increasing the risks for regional crises leading to military conflict. This monograph explores the strategic, political, and ideological underpinnings of each country's threat perceptions of the other and their implications for U.S. regional interests.

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Key Findings

The Israeli-Iranian Rivalry Could Lead to Direct Military Conflict

Once de facto allies, Iran and Israel now view each other as rivals for power and influence in the region. The Iranian regime views Israel as a regional competitor bent on undermining its revolutionary system; Israel sees Iran as its predominant security challenge posing grave strategic and ideological challenges to the Jewish state. Israeli concerns that the Arab uprisings may benefit Iran and enhance its regional influence have only deepened Israeli alarm, even if the reality of enhanced Iranian influence may be questionable.

The emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran in the future could increase the prospects for direct armed conflict between the two nations. Israel might choose to preemptively strike Iranian nuclear facilities in an effort to thwart or delay such a development. A nuclear-armed Iran may view Israel as its primary regional competitor and could demonstrate its nuclear capability in the event of an armed conflict. Even if Iran has no intention to use nuclear weapons against Israel, the possibilities of miscalculation as regional crises escalate are high. The lack of direct communication between the two countries could potentially lead to misinterpreted signals and confusion regarding each actor's intentions and red lines. Even those who are optimistic about the ability of Israel and Iran to create a stable nuclear deterrence relationship may recognize that developing and stabilizing such a relationship is going to take time. Arguably, this transition period could be particularly dangerous.

Despite the Current Animosity, Israel and Iran Have Not Always Been Rivals

Israel and Iran are not natural competitors and are not destined for perpetual conflict. Indeed, these two regional powers do not have territorial disputes nor do they compete economically. Each country has traditionally maintained distinct regional zones of interest (the Levant for Israel and the Persian Gulf for Iran). Arab governments regard each with great suspicion.

Relations between the two nations were often based on shared geopolitical interests, leading to years of cooperation both before and after Iran's 1979 revolution. Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, viewed a de facto alliance with Israel as a counterweight to Iran's Arab neighbors. Tacit Iranian cooperation with Israel continued even after the Shah's fall in 1979. Both the Iranian regime and Israel saw Saddam Hussein's Iraq as the greatest obstacle to their respective national security interests. Iran desperately needed modern weaponry; Israel clung to the old periphery doctrine, which maintained that non-Arab states such as Iran could counter Israel's most committed foes.

Some post-revolutionary Iranian leaders also pursued more pragmatic policies toward Israel. This was particularly the case under the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). The two aimed to reform Iran's moribund economic, social, and political system by lessening its international isolation, leading to hints of easing of tensions with Israel. But these efforts were met with the resistance of reactionary figures within Iran with nonnegotiable views of Israel, and Israeli leaders largely ignored such gestures from Iranian reformists.

Only in the Last Decade Have Israel and Iran Come to View Each Other as Direct Rivals

As late as the 1990s, Israel's security establishment did not consider Iran as its predominant security challenge. Yet today, Israelis view nearly every regional threat through the prism of Iran. Israel's threat perceptions of Iran stem in part from expanding Iranian missile capabilities and nuclear advances. But just as critical is Israel's view that Iranian regional influence is on the rise, infringing on core Israeli interests and

threatening stability in areas bordering Israel. Israeli leaders worry that if Iran acquired a nuclear weapons capability, its influence would only increase, severely limiting both Israeli and U.S. military and political maneuverability in the region.

The rise of Iranian principlists (fundamentalists) has also increased Iranian hostility toward and threat perceptions of Israel. This is due to the evolving nature of Iran's political system, including the rise of the Revolutionary Guards and the principlists under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–). The current configuration of the regime has produced an intense ideological hostility not seen since the early days of the revolution.

Moreover, the Middle East's geopolitical transformation over the last decade has intensified the rivalry. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 eliminated a common adversary of both Israel and Iran. Iran began to see itself as the Middle East's ascendant power, a view shared by many of Israel's political and military elite. Other events such as the 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel—in which Iranian tactics and arms were seen as effective against Israel—reinforced the viewpoint of Iran as the region's great power.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 have further fed Israeli concerns, although that turmoil has also created some new vulnerabilities and limitations for Iranian influence. The new regional landscape has enhanced Israeli fears of continued Iranian penetration into contested arenas close to home (particularly Gaza and Lebanon) and Iranian perceptions of the United States as a declining power.

Rifts Are Emerging Within Israel's Strategic Community About the Value of a Military Strike Option

Differing cost-benefit assessments of a military strike option against Iran exist among both Israeli officials and security analysts. Those arguing in favor of this option believe that the political and military consequences of such a strike may be exaggerated and that even a delay in Iran's program would justify an attack if the alternative is a nuclear-armed Iran. Those arguing against a military strike believe that it could lead to a wider regional war without effectively halting the Iranian program. Divisions within Israel's strategic community on Iran policy cut

across party lines and government institutions, residing largely with individual personalities. Israeli views on the effectiveness of sanctions and sabotage efforts as well as the U.S. position could affect these internal debates.

Looking to the future, if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, and particularly if it assumes an overt posture, Israel may reassess its own nuclear posture of ambiguity. Israel may also seek additional security assurances from the United States, although it may be reluctant to forge a formal security pact because that may undermine the credibility of its own deterrence and limit its military and diplomatic freedom of action.

The Emergence of a New Regime in Iran Could Reshape the Rivalry
A different set of Iranian leaders with less hostile views of Israel could diminish the rivalry between the two nations. The political and economic interests of reformists and pragmatic conservatives could lead to a lessening of tensions if these groups were to gain power in the future. The potential emergence of a secular democratic Iran may entirely obviate the need for a continued rivalry with Israel. Conversely, the complete militarization of Iranian politics under the Revolutionary Guards could lead to a heightening of tensions and Iranian adventurism.

Policy Recommendations

The United States can help manage the Israeli-Iranian rivalry by pursuing policies that seek to avoid a direct military conflict between the two nations. It can do so by continuing policies focused on prevention and preparation. In the case of Israel, this means discouraging an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities while bolstering Israeli capabilities in preparation for a future where Iran has managed to acquire nuclear weapons. For Iran, this suggests, first, continuing policies to dissuade the Iranian regime from weaponizing its nuclear program while preparing to deter a nuclear-armed Iran in the future if such efforts fail. In both cases, U.S. leverage may be more limited than many assume. Specifically, the United States should:

- **Avoid putting public pressure on Israel**. Such pressure (for example, linking aid packages to policy shifts) is likely to backfire in the current environment where Israel's sense of isolation is pervasive, turning popular opinion against the United States and thus allowing for only more defiant positions among Israeli leaders.
- **Quietly attempt to influence internal Israeli debates about the utility of a military strike.** The United States has an interest in bolstering those voices in Israel arguing against this option, which would also negatively affect U.S. interests and make it more difficult to contain Iranian influence in the future. To the extent they agree, U.S. intelligence officials, for example, could quietly support the assessments of former Israeli officials who have publicly argued against a military option. Private U.S.-sponsored intelligence and military seminars targeted at Israeli intelligence and military officials outlining U.S. concerns and risk assessments of military strike options could also help shape this internal debate. The strong ongoing military-to-military relationship between the United States and Israel will remain a critical channel for attempts to influence the Israeli debates.
- **Continue to bolster security cooperation and intelligence-sharing with Israel, making such efforts more visible to the Israeli public.** Such cooperation is important not only in efforts to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran but also to help prepare for a future if such efforts fail. Making the extensive U.S.-Israeli security cooperation more known to the Israeli public may help assuage their fears of isolation and make them less tolerant of Israeli leaders who defy U.S. policy preferences. Encouraging Israeli leaders and journalists to report more about security cooperation efforts could be helpful in this regard.
- **Engage in activities that increase understanding about how a deterrence relationship between Israel and Iran may evolve.** Continuing war games that are already taking place through non-governmental institutions in both the United States and Israel can help develop and explore various conflict path scenarios involving Israel and Iran. Such games are an important start in understand-

ing how an Israeli-Iranian nuclear relationship might evolve and what types of military and political actions might heighten or diminish conflict escalation.

- **Encourage direct communication between Israelis and Iranians through track two dialogues.** Both Israel and Iran will have an interest over time in managing and preventing nuclear conflict should Iran acquire nuclear weapons capabilities. Such communication will not be possible at official levels in the immediate future but is possible through unofficial, track two security dialogues among Israeli and Iranian security experts, sponsored by U.S. or European nongovernmental institutions.

- **Continue both engagement and sanction policies that may affect the internal debate in Iran on nuclear weaponization.** Iranian leaders are not necessarily intent on the weaponization of the nuclear program. Iran may be developing the know-how and infrastructure for assembling nuclear weapons, but it may decide to keep its nuclear program in the virtual realm. Iran's decisions are based on cost-benefit calculations that are affected by U.S. pressures and perhaps positive inducements.

- **Consider future scenarios in which the current Iranian regime is radically transformed.** Iranian fundamentalists appear to have consolidated power after the 2009 presidential election. However, the regime continues to demonstrate severe fractures and faces critical vulnerabilities, including widespread popular dissatisfaction and deepening internal cleavages. The domination of the political system by either the Revolutionary Guards or more democratic forces such as the Green Movement is a long-term possibility. Each scenario could significantly reshape the Israeli-Iranian rivalry and U.S. policy. Hence, the United States should not only focus on the nuclear program but should pay close attention to such issues as human rights abuses in Iran. This signals to the Iranian people and to Iran's potential future rulers that the United States cares about Iran as a nation and sees it not merely as a problem to be solved.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Israel and Iran Increasingly View Each Other as Regional Rivals

In recent years, strategic pressures—beginning with the defeat of Iraq in 1991 but solidifying with Saddam Hussein's removal in 2003—have moved Israel and Iran toward greater competition. To make matters worse, the ideological framing of this conflict has reached new levels, reinforcing the strategic basis of the rivalry. Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program, and potentially a nuclear weapons capability, has particularly heightened tensions between the two nations. Although mutual hostility has defined Israeli-Iranian relations since Iran's Islamic revolution of 1979, the two sides have never engaged in direct military conflict. They have even cooperated at times in the face of common regional threats, both before and after the Iranian revolution. Indeed, the rivalry between the two countries is by no means inevitable given the absence of territorial disputes and traditionally different regional zones of interest (the Levant for Israel and the Persian Gulf for Iran). Arab governments regard both countries with great suspicion.

Yet in the current regional environment, where Iran has stepped up its anti-Israel rhetoric and is asserting its interests in areas that border Israel, each country now views the other as a central security challenge. As Israeli anxiety increases over Iran's nuclear program and growing regional influence, a direct military conflict between Iran and Israel may become more likely. Indeed, the 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah, which was widely perceived as a proxy war between

Israel and Iran, may be a harbinger of future and possibly more direct conflict between the two countries.

Many U.S. and Israeli analysts also view the Arab uprisings of the spring of 2011 through the prism of Iran, worrying that the fall of pro-U.S. leaders such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and the widespread protests among Shi'a majority populations in such countries as Bahrain will only strengthen Iran's hand and tip the balance of power in its favor.[1] Israeli analysts worry about Iran capitalizing on the unrest in the Arab world to assert its own influence and point to such developments as the passing of two Iranian ships through the Suez Canal to illustrate such concerns (this was the first time the Iranian navy crossed the Suez Canal since Egypt and Iran broke diplomatic relations in 1979).[2] Israeli concerns over Iran's nuclear program are also likely to rise if they perceive the uprisings in the Arab world, and particularly the military campaign in Libya (mandated by the United Nations [UN]), as distracting international efforts to keep the pressure on Iran. Such anxieties may be premature, as in many ways the Arab uprisings have created new challenges for Iran domestically and may make its broader regional appeal in the Arab world more difficult, as it no longer holds a monopoly on popular anti-Israel positions.[3] Yet these narratives suggesting that Iran will capitalize on the regional turmoil to advance its rejectionist regional agenda underscore the extent to which many Western and Israeli analysts continue to view Iran as the region's central security challenge.[4]

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[1]   See Michael Slackman, "Arab Unrest Propels Iran as Saudi Influence Declines," *New York Times,* February 23, 2011; and Jay Solomon, "U.S. Reacts to Fear of Iran's Rising Clout," *Wall Street Journal,* March 22, 2011, p. 6.

[2]   See, for example, Annie Tracey Samuel, "The IRGC and the 'New' Middle East," OpenSecurity, March 23, 2011. For a broader assessment of the effect of the Arab uprisings on Israel, including concerns over Iran, see Michael Herzog, "Israel's Strategic Concerns over Upheaval in Egypt," PolicyWatch #1762, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 23, 2011.

[3]   See Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Iran may not be the big winner of Mideast uprisings," *Washington Post,* March 4, 2011.

[4]   An example of such a narrative is Michael Scott Doran, "The Heirs of Nasser," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 90, No. 3, May/June 2011, pp. 17–25.

For Israel, Iran's perceived rising influence is particularly alarming in that it is reaching Israel's borders in Lebanon and Gaza through its political and military support to Hizballah and Hamas. Israel also worries that Iran's influence will only grow and Israel's maneuverability will decrease if Iran acquires a nuclear weapons capability. Although Israelis debate the value of using the "existential threat" terminology because of concern that such language may erode Israel's deterrence posture, many in Israel's security establishment nonetheless believe that future Iranian nuclear use is possible, either by design or during a crisis that escalates beyond the original intentions of leaders on either side.

For its part, Iran also increasingly views Israel as a geopolitical and military rival, which uses its close relationship with Washington to challenge Iran's ambitions in the Middle East. Iran's national security policies, especially its relations with regional allies such as Hizballah and Syria, and the development of its military doctrine and industry, are now greatly shaped by this perception of Israel. Moreover, the ascent of the Revolutionary Guards and the principlists (fundamentalists) in Iran could propel the rivalry to new heights. With Israel as the only regional state considering military action against Iran as its nuclear efforts move forward, the rivalry between Israel and Iran has emerged as a defining feature of the current regional environment. How this rivalry unfolds will thus have a significant effect on U.S. regional interests as they relate not just to Iran but also to the broader Arab world.

Despite the importance of this issue and its effect on regional stability, there are surprisingly few detailed studies examining Israeli and Iranian attitudes and postures toward one another outside the context of U.S.-Iranian relations, and even fewer that may be accessible to policymakers.[5] This study seeks to fill these gaps, helping to explain the evolution, nature, and implications of this rivalry but also offering some prescriptions for how to manage it.

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[5] One notable exception is Trita Parsi's extensive work on the Israeli-Iranian-American triangle, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States,* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007.

The Rivalry Can Further Destabilize the Region, Particularly as Iranian Nuclear Efforts Move Forward

There are many reasons to believe that the Israeli-Iranian rivalry may prove less stable than other cases of strategic competition, particularly the Cold War experience between the United States and the Soviet Union. The most obvious distinction is that Israel and Iran are not military equals, and the asymmetry of power between them may make for a more destabilizing relationship. Israel would thus feel safe from any conventional retaliation of Iran to an Israeli military strike. Iran, on the other hand, may be more tempted to use its unconventional military capabilities, including brandishing the nuclear option, to offset Israel's conventional military superiority, thus making Israel feel more vulnerable to attack despite its overwhelming military advantage. And because of Iran's political ideology and rhetoric challenging the legitimacy of Israel, the introduction of the nuclear dimension into the conflict may prove especially destabilizing.

Even those who believe that Iran is ultimately a rational actor that prioritizes interests over ideology are still skeptical about the ability of the two countries to develop a stable deterrence relationship should Iran become a nuclear weapons state. Unlike the U.S.-Soviet case, there are no direct lines of communication between Israel and Iran, and, even in the Cold War, direct communication did not always prevent miscommunication and the risk of nuclear escalation and accidents.[6] Such risks would only be greater in a situation where there are no diplomatic relations, no emergency communication systems, and no strong civilian control over the military in the case of Iran. Furthermore, the controls to prevent crisis escalation may not initially be in place because it can take time for new nuclear powers such as Iran to develop sufficient sensors for national situational awareness and fail-safe weapons controls. With proxy conflicts already occurring between

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[6]   See Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons,* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993; and Scott Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security,* Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1994, pp. 66–107.

Israel and Iran in Lebanon and Gaza, a nuclear backdrop would make conflict escalation even more worrisome.

Moreover, there are instances of new nuclear states taking risks as they test the red lines of their adversaries. Although this did not prove to be the case in the early days of such nuclear states as the United States, the Soviet Union, China, the United Kingdom, France, or Israel, Pakistan did appear more prone to taking risks after acquiring nuclear weapons. The early stages of nuclear competition between Pakistan and India led to dangerous military confrontations, arguably because of the deterrence Pakistan perceived from its newly revealed nuclear capabilities. We should be careful not to generalize from this experience, but we also cannot dismiss the possibility that the South Asia case may prove to have more similarities to the Israel-Iran case than to the Cold War.

A nuclear Iran may also become more aggressive outside its traditional sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf region and increase its activity in the Levant area surrounding Israel, although one could argue that Iran has already increased its activism in this arena over the past decade even without nuclear capabilities. Iranian expansion in the Levant could include the provision of even more accurate and powerful missiles to Syria and Hizballah. Iran could also be more confident in provoking a fight between Israel and Hizballah or Syria. The widespread Israeli perception that a nuclear-capable Iran would attempt to expand its influence in ways that would directly challenge Israel raises the stakes and potential for direct military conflict.

Another concern is that a nuclear Iran may not just bring about a bipolar nuclear Middle East but may lead to nuclear proliferation by other regional states. A number of studies have warned of a nuclear "tipping point" if Iran continues on a nuclear path and the United States does not intervene to address the security concerns of Iran's neighboring states.[7] Given the likely difficulties of creating a stable deterrence

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[7]   See Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices,* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004. Other policy-oriented pieces discussing chain or cascade effects include Graham Allison, "A Cascade of Nuclear Proliferation," *International Herald Tribune,* December 17, 2004; Patrick Clawson, "Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East: Who Is Next after

regime between Israel and Iran, a multipolar nuclear Middle East may only increase the risks for miscommunication and escalation. As one proliferation expert argues, "Let us assume that crisis stability means preserving a secure second-strike capability so as to reduce the incentive of any state to initiate nuclear weapons use. Given this assumption, a Middle East characterized by a multipolar nuclear competition comprising asymmetric and immature capabilities may be a place of great crisis instability."[8] That said, a nuclear cascade in the Middle East is by no means inevitable, as research on nuclear proliferation suggests that a number of constraining forces may stem nuclear breakout in the Middle East.[9] But the predominant Israeli view that broader regional nuclear proliferation will occur if Iran continues down the nuclear path only intensifies the rivalry and enhances the potential for conflict.

Finally, even those who are optimistic about Israel's and Iran's ability to create a stable nuclear deterrence relationship may recognize that developing and stabilizing such a relationship is going to take time. Arguably, this transition period could be particularly dangerous. For example, an Israeli attack on Iran could occur during this period when Iran's capabilities may still prove limited and Israel may feel that it can more easily justify an attack against an actual nuclear adversary than a hypothetical one.

In sum, the Israeli-Iranian rivalry is dangerous enough at the conventional level; moving the rivalry into a nuclear context could prove

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Iran?" in Henry D. Sokolski, ed., *Taming the Next Set of Strategic Weapons Threats,* Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006; "Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations," U.S. Senate, 2008.

[8]   Andrew F. Krepinevich, "Meeting the Challenge of a Proliferated World," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, April 2010, p. 6.

[9]   See Johan Bergenas, "The Nuclear Domino Myth: Dismantling Worst-Case Proliferation Scenarios," *Foreign Affairs,* August 31, 2010; and Frank Procida, "Nuclear Dominoes: Real or Imagined?" *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence,* Vol. 23, No. 3, 2010. For a more extensive theoretical and empirical account of why nuclear cascade effects may not occur, see William C. Potter, with Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, eds., *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century, Volume I: The Role of Theory,* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010a; and William C. Potter, with Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, eds., *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century, Volume II: A Comparative Perspective,* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010b.

particularly perilous. Such dangers underscore the importance of better understanding the nature and potential consequences of the Israeli-Iranian rivalry and how the United States and its allies might best manage it.

Study Organization and Approach

The next chapter provides the historical context for the current rivalry, briefly outlining the evolution of Israeli-Iranian cooperation and competition. Key strategic shifts such as the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Iraqi threat marked turning points in the regional environment, removing or lessening common threats facing both Israel and Iran. Such threats, namely communism and Iraq (and other forms of pan-Arab nationalism), had led to quiet but at times extensive cooperation between Israel and Iran, even after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Understanding the historical basis for Israeli-Iranian cooperation can help us better understand the nature of the relationship between these two powers today. The historical background also reminds us that even during periods of active Israeli-Iranian cooperation under the Shah, regional considerations—particularly Iranian sensitivity to its image in the Arab world—often limited the ability of the Israeli-Iranian relationship to normalize. This background also underscores how the factors that kept even limited cooperation going after the Iranian revolution are no longer present today, setting the stage for the emergence of the current rivalry.

To understand how the rivalry between Israel and Iran intensified in recent years, Chapters Three and Four explore mutual threat perceptions, first from the Israeli and then the Iranian perspective. These two chapters not only outline the evolution of Israeli and Iranian threat perceptions of the other, but they also explore the basis for such perceptions, focusing in particular on geostrategic and ideological factors. These chapters also pay special attention to how the security landscape since the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Arab uprisings has affected perceptions and positions of the two countries toward each other.

Both Chapters Three and Four ask similar types of questions. How do these countries factor each other into their respective national security policies and ambitions? How have these calculations changed over time, and how might we characterize the security positions of each state toward the other today? How do strategic considerations drive mutual threat perceptions and policies? What role does ideology play in fueling this rivalry? What types of domestic fissures appear within Israel and Iran that may affect policies and actions toward the other? How will the development of Iran into a nuclear-armed power affect this rivalry and future perceptions and policies? And, finally, could this relationship change over time if different Iranian leaders and policies emerge?

To answer these questions, the analysis draws on primary and secondary sources and on over two dozen author interviews in Israel, as well as a number of in-person and telephone conversations with regional experts in Washington and abroad. The interviews in Israel included high-level officials in the military, the prime minister's office, and the foreign ministry, as well as former defense and intelligence officials. The Israel interviews also included nongovernmental experts, including academics, journalists, and think tank analysts.[10]

The final chapter of the study draws on the previous assessments of the different facets of the rivalry to suggest how this competition may affect U.S. regional interests and how U.S. policy might respond. We conclude that this rivalry is not likely to end anytime soon, unless Iran's system of government is fundamentally transformed. Even then, some elements of competition may continue. The key question for U.S. policy is thus less how to end Israeli-Iranian competition than how to manage it.

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[10] Because of the sensitivity of the issue and human subject requirements calling for the protection of subject identities, we could not identify our interviewees by name; we thus refer to them by their generic current or former position and the place and date of the interview. Even in cases where the interviewee granted permission to RAND to reveal his or her identity, we chose to withhold such information to ensure confidentiality.

A Brief History of Israeli-Iranian Cooperation and Confrontation

Given the current state of hostility between Israel and Iran, we may easily overlook the years of cooperative relations between these two states, both before and even after the Islamic revolution. Although such cooperation faced limits and did not remove Iranian animosity toward Israel, it was still extensive at times. Iran's tacit military, economic, and intelligence cooperation with Israel during the Shah's time was based on common geopolitical interests, including fears of Nasserite Pan-Arabism and Soviet communism. Although the Shah was sensitive to Arab anti-Israeli sentiment and became more openly critical of Israel after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, he continued Iran's quiet cooperation with Israel based on shared interests. Israel likewise found that it served its interests to form strategic alliances with non-Arab Middle Eastern countries such as Iran to counter hostile Arab states.

Such cooperation did not end even after the Iranian revolution, despite the Islamic Republic's avowed ideological hostility toward Israel, as pragmatic interests and common enemies often trumped ideology. Iran continued to see Israel as a valuable counterweight to Baathist Iraq whereas Israeli leaders hoped that Iran would serve as a counterweight not only to Iraq but to the wider Arab world. Hence, pragmatic relations between Iran and Israel continued well into the 1980s, though on a much more limited scale. Nonetheless, cooperation stalled by the 1990s, and, by the following decade, the Israeli-Iranian rivalry emerged as a defining feature of the regional landscape.

The Periphery Doctrine: The Enemies of My Enemy Are My Friends

Though the Shah's Iran never officially recognized Israel, the two countries nevertheless sustained a relationship founded on common geopolitical interests. Iran was the "jewel in the crown of the alliance of the periphery" until the 1979 Islamic revolution.[1] Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion developed the periphery doctrine in the 1950s; it was based on the premise that Israel would have to establish close relations with the region's non-Arab countries to protect itself from hostile Arab neighbors. Iran informally recognized Israel in 1950 despite earlier official opposition to its existence.[2] Israel, isolated in the Middle East, accepted the Shah's informal overture.[3]

Israel welcomed relations with Iran more openly after the 1956 Suez war. As author Avi Shlaim asserts, "The Suez War did not produce permanent territorial changes in the Middle East, but it had profound repercussions for the balance of power between Israel and the Arab world, between East and West, and between the conservative and radical forces within the Arab world."[4] It was at this time that Gamal Abdel Nasser became the leading voice of Pan-Arabism and Palestinian liberation, forcing Israel to assess regional shifts and align itself accordingly. Non-Arab countries such as Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia shared a common fear of Nasser's Pan-Arabism and Soviet influence, facilitating the emergence of the periphery alliance.[5]

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[1]   Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall,* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011, p. 195.

[2]   Iran voted against the November 1947 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 that recommended the termination of the British Mandate for Palestine and the partition of the land into separate Jewish and Arab states. The Israeli decision to focus its outreach on a country that voted against its very existence was not restricted to Iran, however. Turkey, like Iran, voted against the Partition Plan, and Ethiopia abstained from the vote. These three countries were the major players in the alliance of the periphery.

[3]   As it were, Israel did not have conventional diplomatic relations with any of the countries considered as part of the periphery alliance. Shlaim, 2011, p. 193.

[4]   Shlaim, 2011, pp. 186–187.

[5]   Shlaim, 2011, pp. 192–193.

Iran and Israel also viewed Iraq as a common threat, providing another rationale for cooperation. By the 1960s, Israel was supporting Iraqi Kurds fighting the central regime; Iran also viewed the Iraqi Kurds as the Iraqi regime's Achilles' heel. Thus, the Mossad and the SAVAK, Israel's and Iran's intelligence organizations, joined forces in aiding the Kurds in their struggle against the Iraqi central government.[6]

The Mossad created a formal trilateral intelligence alliance (codenamed Trident) with Iran and Turkey in 1958; the three countries exchanged intelligence and performed joint counterintelligence operations.[7] Iranian-Israeli ties, driven by Ben-Gurion and the Shah, solidified by early 1959, and Tehran and Tel Aviv developed a close military and intelligence relationship that would continue to expand until the Islamic revolution.

Iran's cooperation with Israel was not based on common fears alone. The Shah had a rather exaggerated notion of Israeli influence in Washington and believed that Israel could help him win the favor of the Kennedy administration, which had been critical of his rule.[8] Iran's expectation of drawing itself closer to the United States through Israel had an important role in its decision to expand ties with Israel.[9] By the mid-1960s, the Shah had permitted a permanent Israeli delegation to Iran that constituted a de facto embassy in Tehran. However, he did not grant Israel more than de facto recognition,[10] and his public state-

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[6]   Yossi Melman and Meir Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran,* New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2007, p. 79

[7]   Shlaim, 2011, p. 196; Central Intelligence Agency, *Israel: Foreign Intelligence and Security Services Survey* (Hebrew), translated and edited by Yossi Melman, Tel Aviv, 1982, p. 57.

[8]   Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle: The Untold Story of Israel's Role in the Iran-Contra Affairs,* New York: Free Press, 1988, p. 47; Shlaim, 2011, p. 195.

[9]   Efforts to draw itself closer to the United States did succeed in terms of military cooperation. By the late 1970s, Iran had started purchasing sophisticated weapons systems from the United States. The purchase of the extremely costly F-14 Tomcat fighter jets by the Imperial Iranian Air Force is often cited as proof of the Shah's appetite for military power and the American-Iranian cooperation that arose as a result.

[10]   Haggai Ram, *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession,* Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 52; Segev, 1988, p. 44.

ments on Israel only grew more critical after the 1967 war.[11] Though Iranian popular disapproval of Israel surged, the Shah continued to deepen relations with the Jewish state after he witnessed Israel's victory over the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies. He believed that Israel's rising status would strengthen Iran's position as a major regional power as well.

Thus, both Israel and Iran reaped benefits from the periphery doctrine. However, Iran's revolution and Israel's 1979 peace treaty with Egypt made it less consequential as time went by. Although some Israeli leaders and analysts continued to find value in this doctrine, explaining continued cooperation with Iran even after the revolution, the doctrine no longer served as a defining feature of Israeli strategy in subsequent years and only further weakened as Israel expanded relations with other Arab neighbors in the 1990s after the Oslo peace process.

Military and Economic Cooperation During the Shah's Rule

The Iranian-Israeli alliance resulted in extensive economic and energy cooperation.[12] To conceal their tracks, Iran and Israel established new companies in Panama and Switzerland under a central legal entity known as Trans-Asiatic Oil, which served as the operating base of the

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[11]   Arab-Israeli relations became significantly more antagonistic after the Six-Day War, in particular after the Khartoum Resolution of September 1967. The Khartoum Resolution, mostly known for containing what came to be known as the Three No's—no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel—served as the basis for much Arab policy toward Israel from 1967 to 1973. (See Council on Foreign Relations, *Essential Documents: Khartoum Resolution,* September 1, 1967.)

[12]   To conceal its cooperation with Israel, Iran established a secret business venture known as Fimarco, registering it in Lichtenstein in 1959. According to the terms of the contract, Iran controlled 10 percent of the partnership, and oil was to be transferred from Iran to Eilat, and on to Ashkelon. By 1975, however, with the reopening of the Suez Canal, competition arose between the two routes that existed for the transport of Iranian oil. By the end of 1978, the entire project had come to a halt. Uri Bialer, "Fuel Bridge across the Middle East—Israel, Iran, and the Eilat-Ashkelon Oil Pipeline," *Israel Studies,* Vol. 12, No. 3, 2007, p. 50; Yossi Melman, "Inside Intel: The story of Iranian oil and Israeli pipes," *Haaretz Daily,* October 11, 2007.

top-secret partnership that existed between Israel and the National Iranian Oil Company in the late 1970s. The Eilat-Ashkelon Pipeline Company, which provided Iranian oil to Israel, grew as a subsidiary of Trans-Asiatic Oil.[13]

Israel's promise of generous returns on Iran's investments in the pipeline matched the latter's desire to establish itself as a dominant player in the international oil market. The Arab oil boycott of 1973, meant to punish the United States and Europe for their support of Israel, also boosted the Shah. Iran had not joined the boycott and therefore stood as its major beneficiary; it continued its normal oil production and its revenues surged as a result.[14] Iran also used its oil production to advance its military interests. In 1977, a joint Iranian-Israeli military effort named Project Flower focused on the development of advanced missile systems. It was one of six oil-for-arms contracts that the countries signed in the late 1970s, which were worth an estimated $1.2 billion.[15] Iran paid approximately $300 million in cash up front and another $250 million in oil and thus became the financier for several Israeli-led research and development projects.[16] As Israel led the development, Iran started the construction of missile assembly and test facilities, with the understanding that both countries' armies would purchase the new defense systems once operational.

Israeli-Iranian Cooperation After the 1979 Revolution

Iran's post-revolution foreign policy was at first overzealous and ideological. The revolutionaries saw the Shah's overthrow not as a final goal in itself but as a first step toward "liberating" the wider Middle East from U.S. domination. The Persian Gulf's Arab regimes, backed by the United States, were the next stop for the Islamic revolution. The

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[13] Melman and Javedanfar, 2007, p. 81; Melman, 2007.

[14] Melman and Javedanfar, 2007, p. 81.

[15] Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), Research Library, "Country Profiles: Iran Missile Overview," updated October 2010.

[16] Melman and Javedanfar, 2007, p. 81.

Islamic Republic focused its efforts on stirring up Shi'a populations in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. However, Iran's efforts to overthrow the old order were largely ineffective and in many ways counterproductive. Faced with the threat of a revolutionary Iran, the Persian Gulf states formed the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 and aided Saddam Hussein's military conflict with Iran.

However, much like the Shah, the Islamic Republic realized the value of an Israeli counterweight to its Arab neighbors, particularly Iraq. Saddam's war against Iran became a major incentive for Iranian-Israeli cooperation. A low-level relationship between Iran and Israel helped the regime avoid total isolation while it benefitted from desperately needed Israeli (and U.S.) weapons. Israel itself had a vested interest in Iraq's defeat, as it viewed Saddam Hussein as a central threat to its security.[17]

Supplied by both the United States and the Soviet Union, Iraq was a formidable military force. Iran was in desperate need of modern military equipment and, given a cutoff of U.S. weapons, came to rely on Israeli military cooperation.[18] Moreover, Saddam Hussein sought to advance Iraqi nuclear capabilities and, in light of its far-reaching military force, a victorious Iraq presented a far more potent challenge to Israel than Iran did at the time. Israel's shipment of arms to Iran was based on its own unique strategic imperatives and preceded the Iran-Contra affair.

In early 1980, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin approved the shipment of tires for Phantom fighter planes, as well as weapons for the Iranian Army. Israel's actions violated U.S. policy, which stated that no arms be sent to Iran until the release of American hostages at the U.S. embassy in Tehran.[19] In return for Israeli assistance, Khomeini

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[17] See Parsi, 2007.

[18] Though, according to some, the Israelis would have liked Iran and Iraq to bleed each other in a long, drawn-out war of attrition. The supply of arms to Iran would fuel the war and sustain the stalemate. So long as Iraq remained distracted by warfare with Iran, it would not have the opportunity to join forces with Syria or Jordan to form a new eastern bloc against Israel. Shlaim, 2011, p. 441.

[19] Segev, 1988, p. 5.

allowed large numbers of Iranian Jews to leave Iran for the United States or Israel.[20] The Iran-Contra affair led to even greater cooperation between Iran and Israel.[21]

The Iran-Contra affair was the result of a secret effort by senior Reagan officials to free American hostages who had been held in Lebanon by Iran-sponsored Hizballah. Iran's dire economic situation and the stalemate with Iraq made it more amenable to engagement with the United States.[22] Iran required U.S. arms to sustain its war against Iraq, and the United States was willing to sell it arms in the hopes of freeing the hostages and also financing the Contra guerillas fighting against the Marxist Sandanista regime in Nicaragua.[23] Israel became a conduit for arms transfers between the United States and Iran. Not only were such arms transfers financially lucrative for Israeli arms traders, but Israeli officials continued to find value in supporting Iran to counter the common Iraqi threat while leaving the door open for improved relations with Iran in the future.

As the Iran-Iraq war persisted, Iran continued to collaborate secretly with Israel on defense issues, while ramping up its rhetoric against the Jewish state in public.[24] The regime's painting of Israel as a threat to the Arab world eased Iran's sense of isolation and enhanced its image as a force of "resistance." The Iran-Iraq war was depicted as an effort to liberate occupied Palestinian lands, hence the slogan "Rah-e Karbala as Qods Migozarad" (The path to Jerusalem is paved through

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[20] Parsi, 2007, p. 95.

[21] See Segev, 1988.

[22] Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic,* New York: Times Books, 2006, p. 106.

[23] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 113; Takeyh, 2006, p. 106.

[24] As author Trita Parsi explains, just as the Shah had done in the years before the Islamic revolution, the leaders of the Islamic Republic relied on overt criticism of Israel to advance their standing in the Middle East and win the favor of surrounding Arab countries. Parsi, 2007, p. 101.

Karbala).[25] Iran also hastened the creation of Hizballah after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Despite Iran's behavior, Israel benefited from the arms deals, both economically and geopolitically.[26] In addition to making money off the sales, Israel hoped to win the favor of "moderates" in the Iranian regime who would potentially take power after Ayatollah Khomeini's death and steer Iran toward better relations with Israel.[27] Iran did indeed adopt more pragmatic policies after Khomeini's death in 1989, though even tacit cooperation between the two states had ground to a halt by the 1990s.

A Growing Rivalry

Cooperation between Israel and Iran diminished by the 1990s, but the two states did not yet view each other as direct rivals. Israel was still preoccupied with the threat posed by Iraq under Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf war. Although the Israeli security establishment became increasingly concerned about Iranian missile development (with ranges that could reach Israel) and nuclear programs during this period, the Iranian threat had not yet reached the discourse of the political echelons or the Israeli public. And in the late 1990s, even Israel's security establishment considered a reassessment of the Iranian threat, with some security elites arguing that a lessening of tensions was possible given that Iran did not view Israel as its central security challenge. During this period, Iranian leaders such as Khatami also offered conciliatory gestures to Israel as part of Iran's engagement policies toward the United States, including proposals suggesting that Iran would support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Iran under

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[25] Farhang Rajaee, *The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression,* Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1993.

[26] In effect, Israel's aid to Iran enabled the Islamic Republic to restrain the Iraqi threat and neutralize Israel's eastern front. See Parsi, 2007, p. 112.

[27] Parsi, 2007, pp. 108–109.

Khatami was also preoccupied by internal issues and more immediate threats, such as Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

But by early in the following decade, the Israeli-Iranian rivalry became well established and visible. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq led to the defeat of longstanding Iranian adversaries (the Taliban and Saddam Hussein), resulting in widespread regional perceptions of growing Iranian regional influence. The Israelis began viewing Iran as the source of every regional conflict they faced as they perceived Iranian ties strengthening with such nonstate actors as Hamas and Hizballah, threatening stability in areas bordering Israel. The election of Iranian President Ahmadinejad in 2005 and his virulent anti-Israel rhetoric and Holocaust denials only exacerbated Israeli fears of Iran.

As Israel fought wars with Iranian allies (Hizballah in 2006 and Hamas in 2008), Iran's role in offering military support and training further elevated the Iranian threat in Israeli strategic analyses. Israeli leaders no longer viewed the peace process as a central component to curbing Iranian influence; they now believed that curbing Iranian regional influence would be key to resolving Israel's dispute with its Arab neighbors. Iran's continued pursuit of nuclear capabilities during this decade only further fueled threat perceptions of Iran as Israel's most dangerous regional opponent. In short, over the last decade, Israelis have come to see nearly every regional challenge as emanating from Iran.

Iran's view of Israel as a direct rival also solidified during this period. The regime began to see Iran as the Middle East's ascendant power and increasingly viewed Israel as an obstacle to its ambitions. Increasing tensions and competition with the United States often translated into more hostile Iranian rhetoric, which aimed to bolster the Ahmadinejad government's domestic and regional credentials.

Conclusion

Israel and Iran cooperated on a wide range of issues before Iran's 1979 revolution. The two countries were united in their fears of Nasserite pan-Arabism and Soviet influence in the Middle East. Israel viewed

Iran as an important part of its periphery doctrine, which was meant to offset Arab states through military, intelligence, and economic cooperation with such non-Arab states as Iran. The Shah saw Israel as a useful counterweight to the Arab world and also believed that Israel's influence in Washington would benefit Iran as an aspiring great power. Nevertheless, the Shah was also conscious of anti-Israeli sentiment throughout the Middle East and was reluctant to embrace Israel too closely or publicly.

Israeli-Iranian cooperation did not end with the Shah's overthrow. At war with Iraq and opposed by much of the Arab world, the Islamic Republic favored limited cooperation with the Jewish state. Some Israeli leaders still hoped that post-revolutionary Iran would remain a part of the periphery alliance. Common geopolitical interests facilitated tacit cooperation, though to a much more limited extent. This did not alleviate Iranian ideological hostility toward Israel; the Iranian regime fought Israel by proxy through such groups as Hizballah. Unlike the Shah, Iran's revolutionary regime did not solely view Israel in geopolitical terms. Nevertheless, Iranian pragmatism toward Israel continued to shape policy well into the 1990s.

This examination of past cooperation between Israel and Iran, based on pragmatism and common interests, presents a sharp contrast to the nature of the current rivalry. The strategic factors driving such collaboration in the past—Nasserism, the Soviets, and Iraq—are no longer present today. Strategic developments over the past decade have in fact only intensified the rivalry, as the following two chapters will address in greater depth. The ideological nature of the relationship, although present since the Islamic revolution, has also taken on greater significance in recent years, reinforcing strategic competition between the two nations. Fundamental strategic and ideological shifts will thus be necessary to once again move Israeli-Iranian relations back to a more cooperative stance.

Israeli Perceptions of and Policies Toward Iran

Over the past decade, Iran has emerged as Israel's main rival. From Lebanon to Gaza to the dramatic 2011 revolts that swept through Egypt and the Arab world, Israelis view nearly every regional challenge through the prism of Iran. Despite brief attempts to relax tensions with the Islamic Republic in the late 1990s, any vestige of the periphery doctrine is now gone. Today, there is a basic incompatibility of interests between the two countries, suggesting that a return to even limited cooperation—as occurred both before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution—may no longer be possible.

Not only do Israelis view their geostrategic interests as in direct competition with Iran in the current regional landscape, but the ideological nature of the rivalry has intensified in recent years. Indeed, despite division among the Israeli security elite on almost every national security issue, there is a near consensus about the severity of the Iranian challenge. That said, domestic fissures begin to emerge when considering varying Israeli policy assessments of how to respond to Iran and its nuclear program. Such divisions underscore how domestic factors, particularly the views of prominent Israeli leaders, will prove a critical driver in how Israelis perceive Iran over the coming years.

Today many in Israel see Iran as their most menacing adversary, but the emergence of different Iranian leaders with less hostile military, political, and ideological stances toward the Jewish state could alter views in the future. After all, Israel and Iran are not destined to engage in perpetual conflict given that they have no territorial disputes and traditionally maintain different core areas of security interests (Iran in

the Persian Gulf and Israel in the Levant). In contrast with strident ideological positions among nationalist and religious segments of Israeli society with respect to disputed land in *Eretz Yisrael* (greater Israel), Israelis do not hold such ideological or religious claims with respect to Iran. It is only Iran's Islamic regime that has brought ideological concerns to the forefront, and many Israelis take these leaders' hostile beliefs toward Israel seriously. Years of Israeli leaders framing the Iranian threat as a dire strategic and existential challenge, combined with deeply rooted anti-Israeli sentiment on the Iranian side, may make it difficult to quickly reverse this adversarial relationship even if the nature of the Iranian regime were to change.

To better understand the evolution and nature of Israeli perceptions of Iran, this chapter begins by considering the factors shaping Israeli threat perceptions, most notably geostrategic concerns and hostile anti-Israel positions emanating from the Islamic Republic's political ideology. The next section considers how Israelis view their policy choices for addressing Iran and its nuclear program, paying particular attention to how different groups within Israel are framing this issue and assessing the military strike option. The chapter concludes by considering how Israel may view and respond to Iran in the future, particularly if Iran emerges as a nuclear power.

GeoStrategic Concerns Are Driving Israeli Threat Perceptions of Iran, but So Is Iranian Ideology

Iranian Military Capabilities, Particularly Its Missile Program, Elevated the Iranian Threat in the 1990s

Israeli leaders have not always viewed Iran as a central strategic challenge. One of the earliest Israeli leaders to publicly discuss Iran as a national security threat was Ephraim Sneh, who later served as Israel's deputy minister of defense. At the end of 1992, when he was a member of Knesset, he submitted a motion highlighting the Iranian threat at a time when few Israelis believed that Iran posed a greater threat to Israel than Saddam Hussein's Iraq. According to a high-level former Israeli official, although Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin expressed sup-

port for Sneh's position, the Rabin government was largely focused on the Palestinian issue.[1] Indeed, Rabin believed that solving the Palestinian conflict was critical to giving Israel the legitimacy and international support it would need to confront Iran in the future.[2]

By the mid-1990s, however, Israel's security establishment started to focus on Iran more intensely as the Islamic Republic began developing long-range missiles beyond the range of Iraq. According to one Israeli journalist and author, the development of such capabilities marked a turning point in the military and intelligence community's views of Iran.[3] An Israeli official shared this view, arguing that the Israelis "woke up" to the Iranian threat in the 1990s as Iran moved forward with its missile and nuclear programs.[4] Indeed, Iran's missile development accelerated considerably in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. Iraqi Scud missile attacks against Iranian cities in the last stages of the war likely contributed to Iran's interest in developing a missile force designed to project power in the event of a conflict, including missiles with ranges reaching Israel.[5]

Despite growing concern over Iran's missile development, Israeli intelligence did not view Iran's nuclear threat as an immediate concern when Iran revived its civilian nuclear program in the late 1980s and early 1990s (the program had been started by the Shah but was largely suspended after the 1979 Islamic revolution). In 1995, for example, Prime Minister Rabin suggested that Israel had time to deal with the Iranian nuclear challenge, arguing that Iran would not acquire a nuclear bomb for another 10–15 years.[6] Although there were "a few

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[1]   Interview with former Israeli official, August 22, 2010, Herzliya.

[2]   Yitzhak Rabin often framed peace negotiations with the Palestinians as necessary to resolve Israel's "inner circle of threat" so that it could deal with the "outer circle of threat" coming from Iran and its nuclear program. See Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael B. Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare," *The New Republic,* February, 5, 2007.

[3]   Interview with Israeli journalist, August 19, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[4]   Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[5]   For an overview of Iran's solid and liquid fuel missile systems, see Federation of American Scientists, "Weapons of Mass Destruction: WMD Around the World," undated.

[6]   Interview with Israeli analyst, August 22, 2010, Tel Aviv.

renegade voices in the Israeli intelligence community trying to elevate the Iranian ranking [nuclear file]," Iran was at that time considered a "relatively low risk."[7] So while Iran's expanding missile and nuclear programs throughout the 1990s raised concerns among Israel's security establishment, as did Iranian complicity in terrorist attacks designed to undermine the peace process, Iran nonetheless did not emerge as a serious issue among the Israeli public or political echelons at this time.[8]

Moreover, even among Israel's security establishment, Iran was not necessarily the predominant concern. Indeed, in 1997 the Ministry of Defense undertook a review of Iran policy as part of its broader effort to revise Israel's defense doctrine. According to a former defense official involved in that process, the Israeli military viewed Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as more serious threats than Iran.[9] Although Israeli strategists believed that there was something "corrosive" about Iranian ideology and were concerned about its missile and nuclear capabilities, they nevertheless still believed that Iran and Israel had common interests (e.g., hostility toward Iraq). Even though Israel was "not looking for a love affair," it did think some relaxation of tension was possible given that Israel was not necessarily Iran's priority.[10] According to this former defense official, the Ministry of Defense drove the strategy but received government support for it starting before Benjamin Netanyahu's term as prime minister and continuing through Ehud Barak's subsequent term.[11]

However, voices of dissent emerged from such individuals as Uri Lubrani, a former Israeli diplomat serving in Iran, who argued that

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[7]   Melman and Javedanfar, 2007, p. 152.

[8]   Interview with Israeli journalist, August 19, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[9]   Interview with former defense official, August 18, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[10]   Interview with former defense official, August 18, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[11]   This account contrasts with Trita Parsi's argument that Prime Minister Netanyahu was primarily responsible for the reassessment. Parsi argues that Netanyahu came to office in 1996 seeking to undo the peace process and refocus Israel on a periphery strategy—e.g., secret or open alliances with non-Arabs to balance Arab threats. A government report was critical of the shrill rhetoric of Rabin and Peres on Iran, and Netanyahu requested an intelligence assessment according to Parsi, 2007, especially pp. 193–197.

the Iranian psyche would never allow acceptance of Israel. Nonetheless, a significant number of security officials still believed that they could benefit from a strategy of limited rapprochement with Iran. Despite such assessments, Israeli policy still dismissed gestures from the more pragmatic leadership under Iranian President Khatami in the late 1990s, including suggestions by some Iranian officials that Iran was willing to recognize a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[12]

Yet it was not until the early 2000s, and certainly after the 2003 Iraq war that removed Saddam Hussein as the common enemy of both Israel and Iran, that Iran unequivocally rose to the top of Israel's national security agenda. The exposure and inspection of the Natanz nuclear site in 2002 raised serious concerns in military intelligence and moved the Iran issue to political levels and to the public's attention.[13] At this time, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon also appointed Meir Dagan to lead the Mossad and tasked him to "head the efforts to prevent Iran's nuclear program," thus raising the profile of the Iran file.[14]

Moreover, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres's belief in the early 1990s that a successful peace process would put Israel in a better position to deal with Iran (because it would give Israel international legitimacy if it were attacked, would strengthen relations with the United States, and would decrease Arab dependency on Iran) no longer drove policy a decade later. Not only were Israelis more skeptical of the peace process in the wake of the second Intifada and the violence that followed Israeli withdrawals from southern Lebanon and Gaza, but Israeli analysts also viewed Iranian political and military support as having

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[12] See Parsi, 2007, especially pp. 213–214. Parsi cites reports suggesting that Iran approached Israel about a missile deal during this period and through back channels tried to signal that Iran was "not Iraq" (i.e., did not want to destroy Israel), but that Israel's Ministry of Defense opposed any engagement with Iran.

[13] Interview with former Israeli official, August 22, 2010, Herzliya.

[14] Melman and Javedanfar, 2007, p. 166.

grown much closer to Syria and nonstate actors fighting Israel such as Hamas and Hizballah.[15]

Israeli security elites also viewed Sunni Arab states as equally concerned about growing Iranian influence, making it less urgent in their view to address the peace process to drive a wedge between Iran and Arab states. Such assessments thus reversed the link between the peace process and Iran advocated by Rabin. Rather than viewing the peace process as important for addressing Iran, key Israeli leaders came to believe that it would be difficult to make peace with the Palestinians without first dealing with Iran. As Prime Minister Netanyahu has argued, "What has been preventing peace? Iran with Hizbullah, Iran with Hamas, Iran that succeeds in dominating and intimidating moderates everywhere. . . . But if there will be a change in Iran, this . . . would give peace a tremendous opening. . . ."[16] Critics of this view argue that Netanyahu is using Iran as an excuse to avoid a settlement with the Palestinians.[17] But motivations aside, there is little dispute that the Israeli security establishment and political elite now view Iran as Israel's central security challenge and an integral and dangerous player in areas bordering Israel, particularly Gaza and southern Lebanon.

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[15] According to an Israeli military analyst, Israeli assessments of the 2006 war suggest that the Iranians were disturbed by Secretary-General of Hizballah Hasan Nasrallah's actions and have since put him on a shorter leash. The military analyst argued that Iranians now sit on Hizballah's board and have more authority in Hizballah's decisionmaking. Interview with Israeli military analyst, August 15, 2010, Herzliya. An Israeli official shares this assessment, arguing that although Hizballah and Iran's interests may diverge at times, Hizballah is trained by Iran to fight Israel and is Iran's major tool to use against Israel. Interview with Israeli official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

However, Iran also had a major decisionmaking role regarding Hizballah in the 1980s. Rather, Hizballah's transformation from a militia into a national actor, discussed below, may have significantly changed the dynamics between the Lebanese group and Iran over the past two decades.

[16] Interview with Prime Minister Netanyahu, RAI TV, Italy (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Iran: Statements by Israeli Leaders—June 2009," June 22, 2009).

[17] Interview with former intelligence official, August 18, 2010, Tel Aviv.

Israeli Concerns About Iran Extend Beyond Military Capabilities to Balance of Power Considerations

Growing Israeli concerns about Iran did not only emerge as a result of Iran's rising military capabilities and association with terrorist groups and activities. Israelis have also become increasingly disturbed by what they view as rising Iranian influence tipping the regional balance of power in favor of "resistance" groups at the expense of the United States and its regional allies.[18]

Many Israeli analysts and officials view Iran as a radical, revolutionary force harboring hegemonic regional aspirations. As a Foreign Ministry strategic assessment suggests: "The strategy of regional hegemony pursued by Iran is the primary strategic influence in this region. The Iranian threat with its four components—the nuclear project, the support for terrorism, the attempts to undermine pragmatic Arab regimes, and the ideological-theological threat—remains at the core of Israel's foreign policy agenda."[19] In Israeli assessments, Iranians aspire to leadership of the Muslim world, using anti-Israel stances to bolster Iran's regional legitimacy among Arab populations.

Israeli officials also view Iranian goals as similar to those of other extremist actors such as al-Qaeda, which is to challenge the global balance of power in ways that undermine U.S. and Western influence. The notion that Sunni extremists in al-Qaeda may actually pose a threat to Shi'a Iran, as a number of Western assessments suggest, does not resonate among many Israeli security analysts who see all Islamic extrem-

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[18] Such balance of power concerns arguably began in the early 1990s when Israelis began to view Iran as a challenge to the U.S.-led regional order after the 1991 Gulf war and the Madrid peace process. Trita Parsi dates the Israeli-Iranian rivalry to the early 1990s when Israel and Iran emerged as the region's most powerful states, even if Iran's military buildup continued to focus on Iraq and Iranian leaders viewed Israel as a "non-threat" at that time. See Parsi, 2007, p. 144. Parsi also argues that Shimon Peres and other Labor Party leaders in the early 1990s played up the Iranian threat to "sell the peace process" to the Israelis (Parsi, 2007, p. 170).

[19] Eran Etzion, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Situation Assessment for 2008–2009," *Strategic Assessment,* Vol. 12, No. 1, June 2009, pp. 52–53. Etzion was the deputy head of Israel's National Security Council from 2005–2008 and is currently head of the Foreign Ministry's political planning division. This strategic assessment was the first of its kind since Israel's inception.

ism as detrimental to Israeli interests. In one official's view, Iran differs from al-Qaeda in tactics only, targeting Israel first as opposed to al-Qaeda's focus on the United States; strategically, the two movements are aligned.[20] In this official's view, the United States is facing a "two-head monster" that requires confronting al-Qaeda and Iran simultaneously.[21] Israelis view Iran, as they do al-Qaeda, as harboring not only regional but global aspirations.[22] Why else, they ask, would Iran be developing missiles that can reach Europe and Asia?[23]

Finally, Israeli views of Iran in relation to the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the widespread unrest throughout the region in 2011 similarly have focused on concerns about how these developments might affect the regional balance of power in favor of Iran. Israeli leaders warn that the future government in Egypt after Mubarak could follow the Iran model with an Islamist government.[24] They also have expressed concern that Iran would capitalize on the regional instability to enhance its regional influence, leading to what Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman called the "Iranization of the region."[25] The notion that the Arab revolts may create new challenges for Iran is not widely discussed or accepted in Israeli policy circles; the predominant view is concern that Iran and its allies—particularly Hamas—will gain from the turmoil. Although the unrest in Syria opened new debate in Israel about the potential to break Iran's rejec-

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[20] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[21] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[22] One Israeli official suggested that a colleague in Israel's National Security Council saw an Iranian strategic plan a few years earlier and the plan did not just look at the broader Middle East but went as far as Gibraltar, suggesting to this official that the Iranians view themselves as central globally, not just regionally. Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[23] Interview with former Israeli official, August 22, 2010, Herzliya.

[24] Rebecca Anna Stoil, "Netanyahu: Danger that Egypt will go in direction of Iran," *The Jerusalem Post,* February 7, 2011. For a contrary and more optimistic Israeli view from former Defense and Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, see Arens, "Growing Mideast democracy could benefit Israel too," *Haaretz Daily*, April 5, 2011.

[25] See Herb Keinon, "Amid Shifting Regional Sands, Mullen Reaffirms US-Israeli Strategic Ties," *Jerusalem Post,* February 15, 2011, p. 2.

tionist front, new Egyptian policies such as the opening of its border to Gaza and brokering a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement reinforce Israeli concerns about the continued resilience of Iranian-backed groups.

Israelis Are Concerned About the Influence a Nuclear Weapon Would Give Iran

Israeli security elites have several pressing concerns with respect to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons capabilities. Specifically, Israeli leaders worry that nuclear weapons may provide a cover that would embolden Iran and its allies, lead to greater regional alignment with Iran, further erode U.S. influence, and trigger broader regional proliferation that would further limit Israel's freedom of action.

The first concern, that an Iranian bomb would provide cover for Iran and its allies to act more aggressively toward Israel, is often expressed through the example of Hizballah. Today, Israeli analysts believe that Hizballah limits its actions against Israel because of fears of Israeli retaliation in Beirut. But as one military analyst reasons, if Iran had a nuclear capability, Israel may not be able to act as freely against Lebanon and thus would be less able to limit Hizballah's actions.[26] Israelis also worry that Iran may not view Israeli nuclear capabilities as credible, since Israel has not yet used such capabilities and Iran may question Israel's willingness to inflict massive civilian casualties.[27] Of course, Israel still maintains extensive and superior conventional capabilities, but its military may feel the need to pursue more caution, even on the conventional level, under the shadow of a nuclear Iran given the lack of clear red lines and uncertainty about which Israeli actions might lead to nuclear escalation.

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[26] Interview with military analyst, August 15, 2010, Herzliya. But the military analyst outlining this argument also does not believe that Iran would give nuclear weapons to Hizballah nor would Iran launch a nuclear attack on Israel in retaliation for the killing of Lebanese. A wargame in Israel that assumed that Iran had a nuclear bomb also raised concerns about a nuclear-armed Iran blunting "Israel's military autonomy" but also predicted Iranian restraint. See Dan Williams, "Israel plays wargame assuming Iran has nuclear bomb," Reuters, May 17, 2010.

[27] Interview with Israeli official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

Second, many Israeli analysts and officials believe that an Iranian bomb may lead the Arab world toward closer alignment with Iran. Current Israeli assessments suggest widespread Arab hostility toward Iran and fears of its growing influence. According to one military analyst, for example, the former head of the Mossad was convinced that the Egyptians and Saudis were as worried about Iran as Israel (at least before the ousting of President Mubarak), even if they would be unlikely to assist Israel in a military attack.[28] A former intelligence official similarly argued that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states might feel more threatened by Iran than by Israel, and share Israel's expectation that the United States needs to prevent development of an Iranian bomb.[29] An Israeli official suggested that Gulf states are more worried about Iranian subversion among their Shi'a populations than the nuclear threat itself—a fear that has only grown with the uprisings throughout the region in 2011 that has hardened Gulf leadership's positions toward Iran.[30] In this sense, there is overlap in this official's view between "pragmatic" Arab rulers and Israel, which helps frame the challenge as one that is not just about Israel.[31]

Yet Israelis fear that if Iran succeeded in acquiring a nuclear capability, Arab resistance to Iran would dissipate as fears of Iranian power and retaliation capabilities increased. Such a nuclear future would thus undermine what Israelis perceive as an evolving tacit alliance between Israel and pro-Western Arab states opposed to Iranian influence. That said, one could argue that such an anti-Iranian alliance was never as firm as Israeli assessments suggest and may only further weaken with the ousting of Arab rulers such as Murbarak, who harbored great

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[28] Interview with Israeli military analyst, August 15, 2010, Herzliya.

[29] Interview with former intelligence official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[30] On rising hard-line positions by Gulf leaderships toward Iran, see "Gulf between Arab-Iran rivals grows stormy" *Associated Press,* April 6, 2011. Other analyses, however, suggest that Iranian complicity in the domestic uprisings is unclear and may be a politically useful tactic by Gulf regimes to deflect attention away from local grievances of their Shi'a communities. See Fred Wehrey, "Bahrain Protests: A Point of No Return for the Ruling Family," *Christian Science Monitor,* February 23, 2011; and Jean-Francois Seznec, "Crackdown in Bahrain," *Foreign Policy,* February 17, 2011.

[31] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

antipathy for Iran.[32] In other words, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons may not be a critical factor in weakening a unified anti-Iranian coalition, as such an alliance may never have been as strong or unified as Israeli analysts assumed.

A third Israeli concern relates to widespread perceptions that an Iranian bomb would only reinforce the perceived ongoing decline in U.S. regional influence. According to one Israeli official, Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is one of the most important international issues of the day, and thus its outcome will affect U.S. standing in the world.[33] In his view, Iranian nuclear success would also have global implications, leading to the end of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and a general erosion of U.S. power.[34] Another Israeli official similarly framed the Iranian nuclear program as a litmus test for U.S. power and its fight against global radicalism. In this official's view, it is not about the bomb but "about how the region will be different if Iran has the bomb."[35] In this assessment, an Iranian bomb would significantly enhance regional extremists and could lead to the downfall of Arab governments (this view was expressed before the Arab revolts of 2011), increasing the risks for both Israel and the United States. Of course, concerns regarding eroding U.S. influence were already widespread even without Iran's development of a nuclear bomb capability, with such regional perceptions increasing after the 2003 Iraq war and more recently in the wake of Arab revolts.[36]

A final Israeli concern relates to the risk that a nuclear Iran would trigger further nuclear proliferation in the region. Nearly every Israeli strategic assessment on the subject includes this prospect, largely dis-

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[32] For analysis of complex regional approaches to Iran, see Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey, "Containing Iran? Avoiding a Two-Dimensional Strategy in a Four-Dimensional Region," *The Washington Quarterly,* July 2009, pp. 37–53.

[33] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[34] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[35] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[36] On regional perceptions of declining U.S. power, see Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martini, and Robert A. Guffey, *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East After the Iraq War,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-892-AF, 2010.

missing research on proliferation trends that question such assumptions. Israel views a multipolar nuclear Middle East as particularly threatening to regional stability and Israeli security given the perceived absence of Cold War deterrence conditions and the complexity of a regional environment with multiple nuclear powers.[37]

Israelis Nonetheless Take Iranian Ideology and Potential Nuclear Use Seriously

Although balance of power considerations largely drive Israeli threat perceptions of Iran and its nuclear program, Israelis nonetheless take Iranian anti-Israel ideology seriously. Indeed, a large factor driving Israeli concerns over growing Iranian influence relates to what is perceived as the ideological nature of the Iranian regime. As one Israeli analyst writes, most members of the Israeli government and Knesset view the Islamic Republic as "a bitter ideological enemy that is determined to bring about the physical annihilation of Israel"; only a minority in the strategic community, often located within Israel's intelligence community, view Iran as a complex actor motivated by national interests and survival.[38]

To underscore the ideological component to the Iranian threat, a number of Israeli analysts point out that Israel does not raise objections to a Pakistani bomb because Pakistan does not issue threats to destroy it. A former Israeli official suggested that the problem with Iran is that the regime wants Israel to disappear and argues that if the regime did

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[37] For further examination of the reasons Israel is concerned about Iran's nuclear program, see Ehsaneh I. Sadr, "The Impact of Iran's Nuclearization on Israel," *Middle East Policy,* Vol. XII, No. 2, Summer 2005, pp. 58–72.

[38] See Reuven Pedatzur, "The Iranian Nuclear Threat and the Israeli Options," *Contemporary Security Policy,* Vol. 28, No. 3, December 2007, pp. 513–514. Pedatzur argues that a deterrence regime between Israel and a nuclear-armed Iran would be possible. Aharon Zeevi-Farkash, a former head of Israeli intelligence, is an example from the minority camp that views Iran as a rational and deterrable actor. Zeevi-Farkash, who played Iran's supreme leader in an Israeli wargame, is quoted as saying that Iran would view the purpose of the bomb as for "self-defence and strategic balance." See Williams, 2010.

not express anti-Israel rhetoric and support groups killing Israelis, Israel would have less of a problem with an Iranian bomb.[39]

Thus, many in Israel's strategic community view Iran's virulent anti-Israel rhetoric and calls for the destruction of the state as fundamental parts of the strategic challenge, not just a rhetorical sideshow. A Foreign Ministry assessment argues, for example, that "The total delegitimization of Israel's existence, which lies at the heart of Iran's policy, is based on deep ideological foundations and attracts growing popular support not only among Shiites but also among Sunnis. Alongside the United States ('the great Satan'), Israel ('the little Satan') is the primary focus for incitement and subversion. . . ."[40] The consolidation of power of the more ideologically minded, less pragmatic Iranian leaders since the June 2009 presidential election and the widespread belief that these leaders are intent on acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities have only further intensified Israel's concern about Iran.

Because many political and security elites in Israel believe that Iranian ideology is a serious factor driving Iranian policy, a number of them believe that actual Iranian use of nuclear weapons against Israel is a viable possibility. Such views are more prevalent among the political elite than intelligence and security analysts, who tend to see Iranian nuclear pursuits as more closely tied to ambitions for regional influence than aims to destroy Israel. Likewise, prominent Israeli experts on deterrence question the probability of intentional Iranian nuclear use against Israel since "in view of Israel's widely assumed large nuclear arsenal and numerous delivery vehicles . . . it appears highly improbable that even a fanatic leadership would choose such a policy. . . . No regime, even if endowed with the most extreme ideology, chooses to commit suicide."[41]

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[39] Interview with former intelligence official, August 18, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[40] Etzion, 2009, p. 53

[41] Yair Evron, "An Israel-Iran Balance of Nuclear Deterrence: Seeds of Instability," in Efraim Kam, ed., *Israel and a Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control, Deterrence, and Defense,* Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Memorandum No. 94, Tel Aviv, July 2008, p. 52.

But political leaders, and even some Iran analysts within Israel's strategic community both inside and outside government, take seriously Iran's ideological hostility toward Israel and the prospect of it leading to nuclear use. Israeli leaders have responded to Iran's anti-Israel ideology with its own symbolic rhetoric drawing on the Holocaust, reminding the Israeli population of Israel's responsibility to ensure the survival of the Jewish people, and reinforcing Israel's strategic doctrine of self-reliance.[42]

According to Israeli analysts Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael B. Oren (currently Israel's ambassador to the United States), although reference to the Holocaust has been "rarely invoked, except on the extremes, in Israeli politics," "the Iranian threat has returned the Final Solution to the heart of Israeli discourse."[43] Holocaust framing of security issues may not be as unusual as Halevi and Oren suggest among Israel's leaders (Abba Eban's reference to "Auschwitz borders" at the United Nations after the 1967 war is a notable example), but they rightly observe how such framing is pervasive with respect to the Iranian threat. For instance, a photograph of Israeli F-15s making a symbolic flight over Auschwitz in 2003, which a large number of former Israeli generals display in their offices, underscores how deeply embedded Holocaust symbolism is in Israeli strategic culture.[44] Israeli leaders frequently compare the challenge emanating from Iran to Hitler's Nazi Germany. As Prime Minister Netanyahu, for example, succinctly

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[42] For a discussion of the role of ideology among Israel's political elite, see Asher Arian, *Politics in Israel: The Second Republic,* Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005.

[43] Halevi and Oren, 2007.

[44] This photograph was brought to the attention of one of the authors in an interview with an Israeli military official, August 17, 2010, Tel Aviv. The author subsequently viewed the photograph in the office of a former general. Dana H. Allin and Steven Simon also discuss this photograph and quote one of the generals (and an air force chief of staff), Amir Eshel, who piloted one of the F-15s and was behind the idea to have the air force participate in the ceremony at Auschwitz to commemorate Holocaust victims: "We pilots of the Israeli air force flying in the skies above the camp of horrors, arose from the ashes of the millions of victims and shoulder their silent cries, salute their courage, and promise to be the shield of the Jewish people and the nation of Israel" (Dana H. Allin and Steven Simon, *The Sixth Crisis: Iran, Israel, America and the Rumors of War,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 46).

stated: "The year is 1938 and Iran is Germany."[45] President Shimon Peres has argued, "As Jews, after being subjected to the Holocaust, we cannot close our eyes in light of the grave danger emerging from Iran."[46]

Halevi and Oren write at length about the perception of a theological basis underlying the Iranian threat to Israel:

> Military men suddenly sound like theologians when explaining the Iranian threat. Ahmadinejad, they argue, represents a new "activist" strain of Shiism, which holds that the faithful can hasten the return of the Hidden Imam, the Shia messiah, by destroying evil. . . . And so Ahmadinejad's pronouncements about the imminent return of the Hidden Imam and the imminent destruction of Israel aren't regarded as merely calculated for domestic consumption; they are seen as glimpses into an apocalyptic game plan.[47]

An Israeli official and expert on Iran expressed similar concern about the growing strength of principlists within Iran with insular views, who may believe in their apocalyptic rhetoric.[48] Even if such rhetoric is for domestic consumption, the official still worries that it will penetrate the hearts and minds of regional populations, Arab and Iranian, who may take it seriously, posing a real risk to Israel.[49]

Prime Minister Netanyahu has also argued that the Iranian regime is driven by an ideology that is not rational and, unlike the Soviet Union, Iran may not always choose survival over its ideology:

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[45] Quoted in Aluf Benn, "Churchill and his disciple," *Haaretz Daily*, October 7, 2009. Also see Peter Hirschberg, "Netanyahu: It's 1938 and Iran is Germany; Ahmadinejad is preparing another Holocaust," Haaretz.com, November 14, 2006.

[46] Quoted in Natasha Mozgovaya, "Peres to Obama: No choice but to compare Iran to Nazis," *Haaretz Daily,* May 6, 2009.

[47] Halevi and Oren, 2007. Also see Chuck Freilich, "The Armageddon Scenario: Israel and the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA), BESA Center Perspectives Papers on Current Affairs, Perspectives 104, April 8, 2010.

[48] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[49] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

The Soviets certainly had global, ideological ambitions, but in international affairs, they acted with supreme rationality. Every time the Soviets were faced with a choice between their ideology and their survival, they chose survival . . . the Iranian regime is different. They're driven by a militant ideology that is based on an entirely different set of values. . . . Iran sends children into mine fields. Iran denies the Holocaust. Iran openly calls for Israel's destruction . . . facing today's militants in the Greater Middle East, we should be well-advised to see the madness in the method—to recognize that not everyone is constrained by the calculus of cost and benefit that has been associated with nuclear weapons; to recognize that some people, organizations and regimes might act in ways that no one has acted since the advent of the era of nuclear peace that has followed Hiroshima and Nagasaki."[50]

To be sure, such rhetoric may be useful for domestic purposes to bolster popular support for government policies. And Israeli leaders are often inclined to draw on symbolism and nationalist ideology in framing their policies.

Moreover, unlike the case with Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, where nationalist and religious ideology significantly shapes and constrains Israeli decisionmaking, no segments of Israeli society hold deep ideological views with respect to Iran. Israel has no religious or territorial disputes with Iran; it is the Israeli perception of the Iranian regime's own hostile rhetoric and ideology that has inspired Holocaust symbolism and framing of the Iranian challenge. If such ideology and rhetoric were to change, Israeli leaders' existential framing of the Iranian threat could also conceivably shift. Indeed, although "ideology is largely an elite affair" in Israel, it is not "necessarily a good predictor of policy" given the pragmatic tendencies of Israel's leaders and, particularly, its population.[51] Even with respect to more ideologically charged

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[50] Council on Foreign Relations, "A Conversation with Benjamin Netanyahu," on the record address to the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, July 8, 2010.

[51] Arian, 2005, p. 414.

issues such as territorial concessions in the peace process, pragmatism has often trumped ideology in Israeli policy.

Yet even Israeli analysts who already do not buy into the notion that ideology is driving Iranian policy still worry about the possibility of Iranian nuclear use. Such analysts do not think that Iran will intentionally launch a nuclear attack against Israel, but they still believe that an attack could occur through the course of conflict escalation.[52] According to such assessments, Iran will look for provocations, and even if nuclear use is not part of Iran's reasoning now, once it has this capability there could be a chain of events that leads to its use.[53] Indeed, as we discuss in Chapter One, the potential for unintended nuclear use could pose a serious risk given that Israeli-Iranian deterrence would differ in significant ways from the Cold War context, particularly when considering the lack of direct communication between the two countries.[54]

Domestic Differences Emerge over How to Discuss and Respond to the Iranian Challenge

As the previous discussion suggests, a widespread consensus exists in Israel about the dangers of the Iranian threat. That said, a number of analysts question the fundamental premise that Iran is a genuine national security threat. Such analysts speculate that the Iranian threat may be inflated for bureaucratic reasons, either to increase the defense budget or to give the Mossad a mission with international importance to bolster its profile. But such views are in the minority among Israel's strategic community.[55]

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[52] Interview with Israeli official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[53] Interview with Israeli security analyst, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[54] See Evron, 2008.

[55] Such views were expressed in interviews with an Israeli security analyst, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv, and with an Israeli journalist, August 19, 2010, Tel Aviv. Haggai Ram makes a domestic cultural argument to explain Israeli "Iranophobia," attributing anti-Iranian sentiment to the rise of the *Mizrahim* (Jews from Muslim countries) community in Israel in the

More widespread differences emerge when turning to the question of how to discuss this challenge and the policy options available to address it. Interestingly, these differences cut across party lines, with some Labor party members taking more hardline positions on Iran than individuals associated with the rightist Likud party. For example, Defense Minister Ehud Barak of the Labor party is reported to favor a military strike,[56] whereas cabinet members from the Likud party, such as Minister Dan Meridor, are more closely associated with favoring diplomatic options. These varying positions stem from different cost benefit assessments among individual leaders concerning options for addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge. Differences also transcend bureaucracies, although Israeli military intelligence tends to take a harder line against Iran than the Mossad or Foreign Ministry, which is more inclined to favor international or other forms of pressure over a conventional military strike. Still, differences on Iran policy in Israel are often associated more with personalities than with party platforms or government agencies, possibly because this issue does not touch on ideological divides within Israeli society as is the case with questions concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Some Debate Has Emerged About the Use of the "Existential Threat" Language

One example of differing approaches toward Iran among security elites relates to how to talk about the Iranian challenge. Some officials and analysts express concerns about overusing the "existential threat" term when discussing Iran's nuclear program. One official argued against discussing Iran as an existential threat because if Iran actually acquired the bomb, this would make Israel look weak.[57] An Israeli analyst has argued for years that Israeli officials should stop talking about Iran as

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late 1970s. Ram argues that the Iranian threat may be manufactured as an expression of Israeli discriminatory policies against this minority community. See Ram, 2009.

[56] See Aluf Benn, "WikiLeaks cables expose an ideological Israel-Iran conflict," *Haaretz Daily,* December 8, 2010.

[57] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

an existential problem.[58] A former senior defense official similarly suggested that Prime Minister Netanyahu's Holocaust rhetoric in relation to Iran alienates the security establishment because of concerns about maintaining a credible deterrence posture. In this official's view, the pendulum has swung in favor of those who think the Iran threat is serious but is not the Holocaust.[59]

Those arguing against using the existential terminology thus prefer to frame Iran as an international problem, not just Israel's problem. This explains why some high-level Israeli officials, such as opposition leader and former foreign minister Tzipi Livni and Likud cabinet member Dan Meridor, no longer use this term even if other officials, such as national security advisor Uzi Arad, still do.[60] Former Israeli deputy defense minister Efraim Sneh has suggested that Iran poses an existential threat to Israel even if it would not launch a nuclear attack because Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would lead large numbers of Israelis to leave the country or convince those Israelis living outside the country not to return.[61] Others who draw on existential threat language believe that Israelis need to speak loudly about the threat to "scare the world" into action.[62]

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[58] Interview with Israeli analyst, October 1, 2010, Santa Monica.

[59] Interview with former defense official, August 18, 2010.

[60] This observation was made in an interview with an Israeli expert on Iran, October 1, 2010, Santa Monica. Avner Cohen also observes this debate, suggesting that several high-level Israeli officials have "expressed misgivings about this term, making the point that they refuse to legitimize statements to the effect that 'Israel cannot live' with a nuclear Iran." See Avner Cohen, "Israel ponders a nuclear Iran," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* August 17, 2010a.

[61] For these reasons, Sneh has argued that a nuclear Iran could destroy "the Zionist dream without pressing the button." Cited in Halevi and Oren, 2007.

[62] Interview with Israeli analyst, October 1, 2010, Santa Monica.

The Greatest Fissures Within the Security Establishment Emerge over Differing Cost-Benefit Assessments of a Military Strike Option

Although Israeli officials rarely speak in detail, or in public, about a preventive military strike against Iran,[63] they frequently refer to the position that "all options are on the table."[64] Israeli military acquisitions and training certainly suggest preparations to keep this option open. For example, Israel has conducted long-range air exercises over the Mediterranean Sea, where distances corresponded in reach and scale to an Israeli attack on Iran.[65] The Israeli Air Force has increased its overseas training and has held joint aerial drills with the United States that simulated a war against an "enemy state."[66] The 2010 F-35 stealth fighter aircraft agreement with the United States is another example of the Israelis' building capabilities with an eye toward Iran,[67] particularly since stealth capability would be critical if Iran acquires the S-300 advanced air defense system from Russia.[68] Indeed, assessments of Israel's ability to strike Iran suggest that Israel already has sufficient capabilities to launch a unilateral attack, including its F-16 and F-15 aircraft and global positioning system and laser-guided munitions

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[63] According to Israeli television journalist Ehud Yaari, "The military and intelligence communities are under strict instructions to avoid making remarks except to affirm that Israel is preparing itself for 'any eventuality.'" Yaari also notes how there is little public discussion in Israel about its options toward Iran. See Ehud Yaari, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Deciphering Israel's Signals," Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy-Watch #1597, November 5, 2009.

[64] See, for example, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, "Iran: Statements by Israeli leaders— Nov 2009," statement in a meeting with U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates, Washington, D.C., September 21, 2009, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, November 29, 2009.

[65] According to one report, this Israeli exercise "really spooked a lot of people" and prompted White House discussions about the possibility of Israel flying over Iraq without U.S. permission. See David E. Sanger, "U.S. Rejected Aid for Israeli Raid on Iranian Nuclear Site," *New York Times,* January 10, 2009.

[66] Yaakov Katz, "Israel, US Hold Joint Maneuvers to Simulate Attack Against Enemy State," *Jerusalem Post,* June 11, 2010, p. 3.

[67] "Israel Wants More Stealth Fighters," *Defense News,* December 15, 2010.

[68] See Amos Harel, "Much-Heralded Jet Headed to Israel," *Haaretz Daily,* November 10, 2009, p. 3.

in sufficient numbers to penetrate Iranian defenses and reach nuclear targets, even if it lacks the capabilities for a sustained attack.[69]

Still, significant differences emerge within the security establishment over cost-benefit assessments of the utility of a military operation. Such differing assessments reach the highest levels of the Israeli government and are held by those who play critical roles in making a decision on this issue: the prime minister, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff, the director of military intelligence, the head of the air force, and the Mossad chief.[70] Aside from a conflict scenario where Israel might attack Iran in the context of a war with Hizballah, there is little consensus, either within or outside government, regarding an Israeli unilateral attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

On the one hand, a number of high-level officials are more favorably inclined toward a military option and believe that Iranian retaliation would likely be limited.[71] Israeli military intelligence officials argue that Iran exaggerates its ability to retaliate. In their view, Iran would certainly exact a price, mainly through employing missiles against Israel and Gulf states and activating Hizballah, but its reach is not unlimited.[72] Netanyahu's national security advisor, Uzi Arad, has stated publicly that he believes that the international community would back an Israeli military strike: "I don't see anyone who questions

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[69] A number of detailed studies, largely by Western authors, have explored the military dimensions of an Israeli attack. See, for example, Austin Long and Whitney Raas, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *International Security,* Vol. 31, No. 4, Spring 2007, pp. 7–33; Anthony Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, "Study on a Possible Israeli Strike on Iran's Nuclear Development Facilities," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 14, 2009; Allin and Simon, 2010, pp. 46–51.

[70] Some analysts argue that the opinions of those sitting in these official positions may matter as much as those of the prime minister's inner cabinet. Interview with Israeli analyst, August 22, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[71] According to one report, senior Israeli officials argue that Iranian retaliation through Hizballah or Hamas may be constrained, as both groups would want to avoid retaliation in Lebanon and Gaza. See Yaari, 2009.

[72] Interview with military intelligence officials, August 22, 2010, Tel Aviv.

the legality of this or the legitimacy. . . . They only discuss the efficacy, which is interesting. It suggests that people understand the problem."[73]

Other officials believe that Iran is unlikely to launch missiles against U.S. troops in retaliation for an Israeli military strike because Iran is not suicidal and would not want to draw the United States into the conflict.[74] Another official suggested that Iranian retaliation against the United States would be limited, but in his view, "compared to an atomic bomb, all retaliation together is nothing—we can survive."[75] Some Israeli officials even believe that just a postponement of the program would be worth the risks of a military strike and would not necessarily require the destruction of Iran's entire program if its main nuclear facilities were hit.[76] According to one former official, the majority of ministers currently in power (including Prime Minister Netanyahu) would support military action to avoid Iran's acquiring a bomb under their watch.[77]

A military analyst shared this assessment, arguing that Netanyahu's sense of this issue is strong and his Holocaust framing of it will eventually lead to a strike on Iran.[78] An Israeli journalist and author also argues that even though Israel's intelligence community believes that Israel's military options are limited, "Israel may decide that the existential danger posed by a potential second Holocaust warrants risk-

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[73] Quoted in Janine Zacharia, "Netanyahu Aide Questions Peace Effort, Iran Sanctions," *Washington Post,* June 23, 2010, p. 6.

[74] Interview with Israeli official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[75] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[76] Interview with Israeli official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[77] Interview with former Israeli official, August 22, 2010, Herzliya.

[78] Interview with Israeli military analyst, August 15, 2010, Herzliya. Jeffrey Goldberg also argues that Netanyahu's views of the Holocaust may shape his decision on whether to use force. See Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Point of No Return," *The Atlantic,* September 2010. However, a former intelligence official argued against the notion that Netanyahu's "Holocaust baggage" makes him more likely than other leaders to attack Iran. In his view, every Israeli leader feels a responsibility to protect Israel; the crucial element is a cost-benefit analysis, not the Israeli prime minister's views of the Holocaust. As he argues, under certain conditions, even a "Prime Minister Belin" (a well-known Israeli politician on the left) would attack Iran. Interview with former intelligence official, August 18, 2010, Tel Aviv.

ing even a serious rift with the United States . . . the fear of a nuclear-armed state whose leader talks openly of destroying Israel may outweigh the views of the country's intelligence experts."[79]

Some Israeli analysts outside government also argue in favor of a military option against Iran, suggesting that despite the risks and complications, "the difficulty is exaggerated, and inaction is bound to bring about far worse consequences."[80] One military analyst argued that even if Israel lost a hundred aircraft during an attack, it would nonetheless prove a success as long as it started a "snowball effect" in Iran (e.g., political and economic turmoil challenging the regime) that would prevent it from acquiring a nuclear bomb.[81] Although such assessments are not widely held outside Israel, and high-level U.S. policymakers have publicly expressed caution about a military strike option, it is important to understand that such assessments are held by a wide array of Israeli political and military elite both within and outside the government.

That said, a number of officials and analysts within Israel maintain a cost-benefit calculus that is closer to prevailing Western assessments, highlighting the complications involved in a military attack.[82] Israeli leaders are aware that a military strike on Iran would be far more difficult and complicated than either the Iraqi or Syrian cases.[83] The effectiveness of an Israeli strike is also in question given the dispersed

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[79] Ronen Bergman, "Letter from Tel Aviv: Netanyahu's Iranian Dilemma," *Foreign Affairs,* June 10, 2009.

[80] Efraim Inbar, "The Imperative to Use Force Against Iranian Nuclearization," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA), BESA Center Perspectives Papers on Current Affairs, Perspectives 12, December 15, 2005.

[81] Interview with Israeli military analyst, August 15, 2010, Herzliya.

[82] Such complications include overflight challenges and long distances, among other operational and political risks and dangers. See Paul Rogers, *Military Action Against Iran: Impact and Effects,* Oxford Research Group Briefing Paper, July 2010.

[83] For a detailed account of the risks and limitations of a military attack on Iran and differences from the Iraqi case, See Pedatzur, 2007, pp. 522–525. Pedatzur concludes that "Israel could attack only a few Iranian targets and not as part of a sustainable operation over time, but as a one-time surprise operation. In other words, even a successful attack on the reactor in Bushehr and other sites may only delay the completion of the development of the bomb for not a long time" (p. 524).

nature of Iranian nuclear capabilities, deeply buried sites, and the intelligence challenges inherent in any attempt to destroy a covert nuclear program, suggesting that an Israeli strike would at most delay, but not halt, the Iranian program.[84]

Some Israeli commentators note that Iranian nuclear sites are now so widely dispersed and buried that the risks of Israeli action would not be worth the limited setbacks it could inflict on the Iranian program.[85] Such an Israeli operation would also likely require all of its aerial tankers to refuel up to a hundred of its jets (Israel's strike on Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 required only eight F-16 fighters in contrast), making it a highly costly operation. As a retired Israeli general put it, "If there's no choice, Israel can set back the Iranian nuclear process," but would be unable to launch a sustained campaign to stop it and would likely face Iranian retaliation through ballistic missile attacks directed against Israel.[86]

According to several analysts, because of such risks the Israeli military does not want to attack Iran, at least not without U.S. support.[87] A former intelligence official similarly argued that a successful strike would only be one that bought Israel at least five years of time, and it is not clear that on its own Israel could launch a strike that could produce this result with low levels of casualties.[88] Another analyst argued that a postponement of only six to eight years would be a success, raising more concerns about Israeli failure than about Iranian retaliation.[89] After stepping down as Israel's head of Mossad, Meir Dagan publicly argued against a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities for similar

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[84] Pedatzur, 2007.

[85] See, for example, "Israelis ponder the perils of hitting Iran," UPI.com, December 30, 2009.

[86] "Israelis ponder the perils of hitting Iran," 2009.

[87] Interview with Israeli military analyst, August 15, 2010, Herzliya.

[88] Interview with former intelligence official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[89] Interview with Israeli analyst, August 22, 2010, Tel Aviv.

reasons.[90] Such concerns are shared by U.S. military officials, suggesting that U.S. views expressing caution about an Israeli military strike may find a sympathetic hearing among some sectors of Israel's security establishment.

Yet despite the internal debate about the utility of an *Israeli* military strike, there is widespread agreement among Israel's security establishment that a *U.S.* strike would be the preferable option. As an Israeli journalist put it, the best outcome for Israel would be enough pressure on Iran that would lead it to "do something stupid" that would trigger U.S. action.[91] Another journalist suggested that Israel's military intelligence branch thinks that Israel should focus on getting the United States to strike Iran or at least find ways to make a U.S. military threat more credible.[92]

Views of the Effectiveness of Sanctions and Sabotage Efforts Such as Stuxnet, as Well as the U.S. Position, Could Affect the Israeli Debate on the Military Option

While there is no consensus today within Israel's security establishment regarding a military strike, several factors could prove vital in tipping the balance in one direction or another.[93] One critical factor is the prevailing view of the success of alternative options, particularly economic sanctions and sabotage efforts against Iran's nuclear facilities (such as the Stuxnet computer worm identified in 2010). Israeli official statements suggest a preference for heightened economic pressure by the global community—particularly Europe, Russia, and China—to prevent Iranian nuclear advancement. Israeli officials and analysts often express confidence that economic sanctions, if more effectively applied, could create enough pressure on the Iranian leaders to shift

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[90] See Yossi Melman, "Ex-Mossad chief Dagan: Military strike against Iran would be 'stupid,'" Haaretz.com, May 8, 2011.

[91] Interview with Israeli journalist, August 18, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[92] Interview with Israeli journalist, August 19, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[93] For an analysis of the conditions that may make an Israeli attack more likely, see Yossi Alpher, "When Would Israel Attack Iran?" *The Forward,* September 1, 2010.

course.[94] A prominent Israeli journalist argued in late 2010 that the Obama administration deserved credit for keeping up the pressure on Iran and that sanctions were sparking an internal struggle within the regime over their nuclear program.[95]

Israeli assessments in early 2011 that the Iranian nuclear enrichment program had slowed are attributed to their belief that economic and diplomatic pressure, as well as sabotage efforts, may be working in at least delaying the Iranian program.[96] The upbeat assessments by outgoing Mossad head Meir Dagan and Moshe Ya'alon (considered a hard-line minister within Netanyahu's inner cabinet) surprised many by suggesting a longer time frame for Iranian nuclear advances than previous statements by Israeli leaders.[97] However, it is not clear whether there is consensus among Israeli officials on such new assessments or how the slowing of Iran's nuclear enrichment efforts might affect Israeli calculations regarding a conventional military strike.[98]

Some analysts believe that these statements were "not aimed at Iran" but rather were made for domestic purposes to showcase Mossad successes at the end of Dagan's term and to influence Netanyahu and Barak against resorting to a military option.[99] Given alternative West-

[94] For example, Prime Minister Netanyahu recently argued: "We need to continue these efforts to bring real pressure—meaningful sanctions against the Iranian regime. They are very vulnerable economically and, I think, also in terms of the legitimacy they have lost among the international community. . . . We now have opportunity to impose effective sanctions." See "Iran: Statements by Israeli leaders—Nov 2009," address o the Eilat Journalism Conference, November 29, 2009, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, November 29, 2009. Such sentiments were also expressed by a former high-level Israeli official in a conference attended by one of the authors in Washington, D.C., January 2010.

[95] See Nahum Barnea, "From Obama to Churchill," *Yedi'ot Aharonot* (Hebrew), December 21, 2010, p. 28.

[96] See, for example, William J. Broad, John Markoff, and David E. Sanger, "Israeli Test on Worm Called Crucial in Iran Nuclear Delay," *New York Times,* January 15, 2011.

[97] See Roni Sofer, "Dagan backtracks: Iran may have nukes by 2015," *Ynet News,* January 17, 2011.

[98] See Ari Shavit, "Dagan brought a possible attack on Iran closer," Haaretz.com, January 20, 2011.

[99] Email exchange with an Israeli journalist, February 2011, and discussions with Israeli analysts in Europe, February 2011.

ern assessments suggesting continued advances in Iran's program and a significant number of Israel's security elite who hold a cost-benefit assessment favoring a military option, such new intelligence assessments may not ultimately change the calculations of some key Israeli leaders, including the prime minister. Indeed, in the wake of the international military campaign against Libya, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that Iran's government should be "stopped" like Qaddafi's regime.[100]

The U.S. position is another important consideration affecting Israeli calculations about a military option. President George W. Bush reportedly opposed an Israeli military strike on Iran, and current U.S. military leaders continue to express concerns about this option.[101] Although Israeli public support for a military strike may lessen if the United States is against it, polling shows that the majority of Israelis would still support such an option even in the face of U.S. opposition if they believed that all other options had been exhausted.[102] Indeed, one security analyst argued that if Israel believes that the United States does not have a well-defined strategy, the chances are higher that Israel will strike Iran on its own.[103] An official supported this view, suggesting that if Israelis are confident that the United States is not going to let Iran become "a North Korea" and will maintain economic and diplomatic pressure, Israeli support for a military option would decrease.[104]

But other Israeli analysts argue that Israel would not likely attack Iran without U.S. support no matter what the United States was doing on other fronts because Israel knows that on its own it cannot do more

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[100] See "Israeli PM: Iran should be 'stopped' like Gadhafi," *USA Today*, March 24, 2011.

[101] Sanger, 2009. The Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, suggested that a military strike on Iran could be "very, very destabilizing." Quoted in Phil Stewart, "Strike on Iran Seen as 'Destabilizing,'" *Washington Times,* January 8, 2010, p. 9.

[102] A poll for the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found that 66 percent of Israelis would support a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities if diplomatic and economic efforts fail, and, remarkably, 75 percent said that they would still support military action even if the Obama administration opposed Israel taking such action. See BESA/ADL Survey, "Israeli Views of President Obama and US-Israel Relations," May 4, 2009.

[103] Interview with Israeli security analyst, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[104] Interview with Israeli official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

than postpone Iran's program.[105] Indeed, although Israel has defied U.S. preferences numerous times on other policy issues such as settlement activity, it would be far more difficult politically and operationally to launch a military attack on Iran without U.S. knowledge and assistance.

An Israeli official pointed to a more abstract but potentially influential factor to watch for in determining the conditions that might lead to an Israeli strike: the Israeli psyche. In particular, a sense of growing isolation and victimization leading to a "we'll be blamed no matter what" mentality could make the military option more viable, even if such sentiment is manufactured.[106] A military official similarly noted that although Israelis view Iran as a global challenge, they realized by 2005 that no one else in the world was as worried about Iran as they were.[107] The U.S. 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, suggesting that Iran had halted its weaponization efforts, even if it continued developing uranium enrichment capabilities, only reinforced Israeli fears of standing alone in its concern over Iran.[108] According to such reasoning, the more that Israelis feel that they are dealing with Iran on their own, the more likely a military option becomes a possibility. Such concerns have receded as U.S. and international pressure on Iran has increased in recent years, but this factor will still be important to track as Israeli views could shift rapidly in response to regional uncertainty.

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[105] Interviews with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem; with Israeli security analyst, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv; and with former intelligence official, August 18, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[106] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[107] Interview with military official, August 17, 2010, Tel Aviv.

[108] National Intelligence Council (NIC), "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), November 2007.

Israel and Iran in the Future

Military Doctrine and Policy Are Shifting in Ways That Suggest Some Preparation for a Nuclear Future with Iran

RAND discussions in Israel suggest that officials are reluctant to address futures involving a nuclear-armed Iran, as they wanted to maintain the focus on preventing such an outcome. One official indicated that his office was on a "short leash" in terms of writing papers that address such a future and its potential implications for Israel and the region because of concerns that such discussion in official circles will signal acceptance of an Iranian bomb (Israelis outside government do not face such constraints).[109]

That said, Israeli doctrine and policies are moving in directions suggesting some preparation for a potential conflict with Iran. In contrast to its offensive-based doctrine of the past, Israel has invested heavily in missile defense programs. Iranian missiles are a particular concern for Israel, leading Israel to shift from its two-tier system of missile defense (based on the Arrow II and Patriot systems) to a four-tier system based on the Arrow II, Arrow III, Patriot, and David's Sling systems to better hedge against the failure of any one system.[110]

Toward the end of the second Bush administration, the United States also delivered the X-band radar system, controlled by U.S. forces, to an air base in Israel's Negev (southern) region, along with support-

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[109] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

[110] See Uzi Rubin, "Iranian Missiles and U.S. Missile Defense," PolicyWatch #1598, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 6, 2009. For further details on Israel's missile defense options to counter a nuclear Iran, see Uzi Rubin, "Missile Defense and Israel's Deterrence against a Nuclear Iran," in Efraim Kam, ed., *Israel and a Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control, Deterrence, and Defense,* Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Memorandum No. 94, July 2008. Part of this layered missile defense also includes the Iron Dome missile shield aimed at intercepting rockets from Gaza and southern Lebanon. Unlike the Arrow and David Sling systems that have been developed in cooperation with the United States, Iron Dome is an Israeli project. Israel announced a successful test of the system in early January 2010. See Sheera Frenkel, "Israel Says Tests on Iron Dome Missile Shield Have Been a Success," *London Times,* January 8, 2010.

ing U.S. equipment and personnel.[111] Although the U.S. European Command has deployed troops and Patriot air defense systems to Israel in the past for joint exercises and Iraq war contingencies, the X-band deployment constitutes a permanent U.S. presence on Israeli soil.[112] This sophisticated, long-range early warning radar can detect targets from thousands of miles away, making it a particularly important system for future contingencies involving Iran.[113] The Pentagon agreed to link the X-band radar into the U.S. Joint Tactical Ground Station (JTAGS); the U.S. government had denied earlier Israeli requests for JTAGS because of security classification objections by the U.S. Air Force, so this deployment was viewed as a significant advancement for Israeli early warning systems.[114] Joint U.S.-Israeli military exercises and stepped up high-level military exchanges have further signaled U.S. interest in intensifying the security relationship with Israel to bolster its defenses in response to Iran.[115]

Israel's Own Nuclear Posture Could Also Shift with a Nuclear-Armed Iran

Although the U.S. government has never acknowledged that Israel possesses nuclear weapons, most independent observers and all regional

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[111] The delivery took place on September 21, 2008. See Gayle S. Putrich, "U.S. Deploys Radar, Troops to Israel," *Defense News,* September 26, 2008.

[112] Putrich, 2008.

[113] On a visit to Israel in August 2008, the director of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency argued that the new system would "add precious minutes" to Israel's response time to incoming missiles, noting that "The missile threat from Iran is very real, and we must stay ahead of the threat." Quoted in Putrich, 2008.

[114] According to an Israeli defense expert, "Since they threw in JTAGS, it's become a whole new ballgame. We're looking at a very generous gift from the United States, even it means we have to compromise on sovereignty by having U.S. troops deployed here." Quoted in Barbara Opall-Rome, "U.S. to Deploy Radar, Troops In Israel," *Defense News,* August 18, 2008, p. 1.

[115] See Charles Levinson, "US, Israel Build Military Cooperation," *Wall Street Journal,* August 14, 2010. Also see Yaakov Katz, "Israel Goes Ballistic," *Jerusalem Post,* September 11, 2009, p. 15; and Ilene R. Prusher, "To Defend Against Iran Missiles, US and Israel Conduct Joint Exercises," *Christian Science Monitor,* October 29, 2009.

governments believe that they have long done so.[116] Israel itself neither confirms nor denies such possession. Israel's official nuclear posture is one of ambiguity or opacity. This policy is expressed through the oft-stated expression that "Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East" . . . "Nor will it be the second."[117] This posture has eroded somewhat over the years,[118] but it has proven useful in terms of balancing Israel's deterrence interests with its relationship with Washington.[119]

Despite this opaque policy, Israeli deterrent statements make it clear that it reserves the right to employ this option in the face of unconventional threats to its country. After Saddam Hussein threatened to destroy Israel with chemical weapons in April 1990, then-Defense Minister Rabin stated: "We have the means for a devastating response, many times greater than [the magnitude of] Saddam Hussein's threats."[120] During the 1991 Gulf war, Rabin argued: "How do you think we deterred the Syrians? What did we tell them? We told them: If you strike Tel Aviv with surface-to-surface missiles—Damascus will be destroyed. If you attack Haifa with such missiles, Damascus and Haleb would not remain—they would be destroyed. We will not deal with the missile launchers, we will destroy Damascus instead."[121] Similarly, before the 2003 Iraq war, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon stated that "If Iraq attacks Israel, but does not hit popula-

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[116] For independent assessments of Israeli nuclear capabilities, see Elan et al., 2005; IISS, 2008.

[117] See Shai Feldman, *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in the Middle East,* Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996.

[118] For example, some argue that Shimon Peres essentially acknowledged Israel's nuclear program in 1998 when he stated that "We didn't build this (nuclear) option to get to Hiroshima, but rather to get to Oslo." Quoted in Gawdat Bahgat, "Israel and Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East," *Middle East Policy,* Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 2006, p. 113. Also cited in Elan et al., 2005, pp. 58–59.

[119] For details on the history of Israel's nuclear development and negotiations with the United States over its program, see Cohen, 1998; Shai Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence—A Strategy for the 1980s,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

[120] Quoted in Feldman, 1996, p. 102.

[121] Quoted in Feldman, 1996, p. 102.

tion centers or cause casualties, our interest will be not to make it hard on the Americans. If, on the other hand, harm is done to Israel, if we suffer casualties or if non-conventional weapons of mass destruction are used against us, then definitely Israel will take the proper action to defend its citizens."[122] However, because official acknowledgment of Israel's nuclear capabilities is still prohibited, Israelis have not yet had a public debate about the levels of nuclear capability that would serve as a sufficient deterrent to unconventional attacks or, for that matter, whether its advanced conventional capabilities may be able to more credibly serve similar purposes.

Israel's posture of ambiguity has served it well, but some analysts are now arguing—albeit for different reasons—for a revision of this policy.[123] If the scenario of Iran openly declaring its nuclear weapon capability emerges, Israel will face growing pressure to move away from its ambiguous nuclear stance. For some, this shift in doctrine to an open nuclear posture would be necessary to bolster its deterrent credibility.[124] For example, an advisory report for then-Prime Minister Sharon in 2003 recommended specifying 15 high-value targets from Libya to Iran to strengthen the credibility of Israel's nuclear deterrent.[125] Others argue that Israel may need to move away from ambiguity not only for deterrence but also to build reliable early warning systems between Israel and Iran, should Iran become a known nuclear weapon state.[126]

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[122] Quoted in Elan et al., 2005, p. 55.

[123] See Louis Rene Beres, "Israel's Uncertain Strategic Future," *Parameters*, Spring 2007, pp. 37–54; Pedatzur, 2007; and Bennett Ramberg, "The Nowhere Bomb: Should Israel Come Out of the Nuclear Closet?" *The New Republic,* August 18, 2010.

[124] For a discussion of this possibility and a strategic camp in Israel that may support building a Cold War-style mutual assured destruction (MAD) regime to avoid conflict with a nuclear-armed Iran, see Dima Adamsky, "The Morning After in Israel," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 90, No. 2, March/April 2011, pp. 155–159.

[125] For details on this report, see Beres, 2007, pp. 37–54.

[126] See Reuven Pedatzur, "The End of the Military Option," *Haaretz Daily,* October 14, 2009. For further discussion about the need to move away from ambiguity to bolster a deterrence regime between Israel and Iran, see Pedatzur, 2007, pp. 525–526. Other analysts have argued that even a shift to an "Opacity Plus" posture (not openly declaring the bomb but signaling Israel's nuclear stance more overtly through a lifting of the ban on public discus-

But if Iran pursues a more ambiguous nuclear stance, Israel would be less likely to change its current posture, although the dangers of an ambiguous posture could create some incentives for Israel and Iran to start back-channel or track two discussions on nuclear confidence-building measures. The internal nature of the Iranian regime may also affect what Israel decides with respect to its nuclear posture in the future, as well as how Israel perceives the Iranian threat in its hierarchy of concerns. Other regional developments, such as a regime change in Saudi Arabia leading to an anti-Western and status quo regime, may also shift Israel's perception of the Iranian threat relative to other regional challenges.

At the same time, Israel would be unlikely to forgo its nuclear deterrent even under a scenario where the Islamic Republic collapses, as long as Iran and others in the region continue to maintain other types of weapons of mass destruction. Some Israeli analysts believe that Israel's nuclear capabilities offer little deterrence value and argue that Israel should consider moving toward serious arms control talks and eventual disarmament.[127] Other analysts similarly argue that Israel's nuclear posture is outdated and needs to change to allow for more transparency and accountability in today's security environment.[128] But this position is still the minority view mostly held by academics. The defense establishment and popular opinion still strongly support maintaining Israel's nuclear deterrent and a policy of opacity.

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sion within Israel and military exercises involving nuclear forces) would help bolster Israeli deterrence. For this argument, see Ramberg, 2010.

[127] Israeli scholar Zeev Maoz argues, for example, that Israeli nuclear capabilities failed to deter adversaries in the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars or Iraq in the 1991 Gulf conflict and consequently believes that Israeli policy should move toward a nuclear weapons–free zone. Maoz also argues that Iraqis did not use chemical weapons in the 1991 war because their capabilities were too crude and conventional strikes were more effective, not because of Israeli deterrence. See Zeev Maoz, "The Mixed Blessing of Israel's Nuclear Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Fall 2003, pp. 44–77; Zeev Maox, "Correspondence: Israel and the Bomb," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Summer 2004, pp. 175–180.

[128] One of the most vocal advocates for a shift in Israel's nuclear posture is Avner Cohen, particularly in his recent book, *The Worst-Kept Secret*: *Israel's Bargain with the Bomb,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010b.

A nuclear-armed Iran has also raised the question of whether Israel's security relationship with the United States would change. Some discussion has emerged regarding the possibility of a formal defense pact with the United States in response to an overt or even ambiguous nuclear Iran.[129] But such a pact would surely face resistance in Israel, as it would openly challenge Israel's longstanding doctrine of self-reliance. As an Israeli analyst explained: "Israel must forestall any impression in Iran that Israel lacks an adequate deterrent of its own and is dependent on American deterrence . . . strategic reliance on the US or NATO may incur a cost—for example, demanding that Israel subscribe to the idea of a nuclear weapons–free Middle East—such that it is important to assess whether the same benefit can be achieved without the formal agreement."[130]

Israelis have already expressed discomfort at their increased reliance on U.S. capabilities, such as the X-band early warning radar system that is deployed in Israel but controlled by U.S forces.[131] Moreover, an Israeli official suggested that Israel's interest in a defense pact with the United States has declined in the context of growing questions about U.S. power, reinforcing Israel's classic self-reliance mentality.[132] Some Israeli officials are concerned that there has been little discussion between the United States and Israel about what type of

[129] There has been some discussion about possible Israeli membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as well in response to a nuclear-armed Iran. However, despite enhanced cooperation between Israel and NATO in recent years, it is not clear that either Israel or NATO is interested in full Israeli membership in the organization. It is unlikely that Israelis would feel that they could depend on NATO, and NATO members would be reluctant to become entangled in wars involving Israel. For a discussion of these and other challenges, see Josef Joffe, "Israel and NATO: A Good Idea Whose Time Will Never Come," BESA Center Perspectives Papers No. 77, May 25, 2009.

[130] Efraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran: What Does It Mean, and What Can Be Done,* INSS Memorandum 88, February 2007, p. 78.

[131] Israeli officials have expressed concern, for example, that the system will expose Israeli secrets to the Americans. Israelis also worry that this system will anger the Russians, since its range will allow the United States to monitor aircraft over southern Russia. See Gil Ronen, "Israeli Officials: X-Band Radar May Expose Israeli Secrets to US," *Arutz Sheva,* October 4, 2008.

[132] Interview with Israeli official, August 17, 2010, Jerusalem.

additional deterrence measures the United States could provide Israel in the advent of a nuclear-armed Iran.[133] But a former intelligence official rejected the notion that Israel would seek a defense pact with the United States, quoting a Gulf leader who said to him: "You don't need an umbrella if there's no rain."[134]

Conclusion

Israel's threat perceptions of Iran stem from a range of geopolitical concerns that have elevated Iran to the top of its national security agenda. Iran's military capabilities, particularly in the missile arena, as well as its nuclear advances contribute to Israel's perception of the Iranian threat. But equally critical concerns, although less tangible, are balance of power consideration and a sense that Iranian regional influence has grown over the past decade at the expense of the United States and its allies. This explains why Israeli leaders worry less about Iran using a nuclear bomb against Israel than about the greater influence such a capability would give Iran and its allies, severely limiting both Israel (and U.S.) military and political maneuverability in the region.

Israel's concerns related to the ideological nature of the Iran challenge are also real and not just a cover for underlying strategic motives. A large number of Israeli leaders and strategic analysts take Iranian anti-Israel ideology seriously and argue that it is exactly this ideology that makes Iran's military and strategic challenges to Israel appear so severe. That said, rifts are developing among Israel's strategic community about how to frame the Iranian challenge, particularly the value of labeling this threat "existential," because of concerns that such framing will undermine Israeli deterrence. These differences also feed into varying cost-benefit assessments among Israeli leaders and analysts regarding the utility of an Israeli military strike option. For those who do not favor discussing the Iranian challenge as an existential threat and prefer framing the challenge as an international one, a military option

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[133] Interview with Israeli official, August 16, 2001, Tel Aviv.

[134] Interview with former intelligence official, August 16, 2010, Tel Aviv.

may look less appealing, and vice versa. Such divisions within Israel cut across party lines and even government institutions, residing largely with individual personalities.

A number of factors could tip the balance of this domestic division regarding a military strike, such as perceptions of the effectiveness of sanctions and sabotage efforts. Views of how seriously the United States is pressuring Iran on the nuclear issue and assessments of the nature of a U.S. response to an Israeli attack are also important factors. In short, the domestic context is crucial to understanding future Israeli positions toward Iran, including evolving deterrence and nuclear postures. Geostrategic factors matter, but how Israelis view and frame those factors will prove decisive in how they act on them. If new Iranian leaders change their anti-Israel ideological tone in the future, Israeli leaders could frame the Iranian threat quite differently, even if longstanding animosity and continued strategic competition make it difficult to quickly shift from rivalry to cooperation.

Iranian Perceptions of and Policies Toward Israel

Israel has always occupied a unique place in shaping the Islamic Republic's strategic interests and threat perceptions. Though not a primary or even a direct threat on the scale of the United States, Israel is now viewed by the Iranian regime as a major regional rival. The reasons for Iranian hostility are complex and at times puzzling. Israel is physically far from the Iranian homeland and has no claims on Iranian territory. The two countries do not compete economically. And, until recently, Israel and Iran were not direct military rivals. Israel's immediate zone of security interests, the Levant, is in many ways marginal to Iranian national security. Rather, Iran's interests in the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea region, and neighboring countries such as Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are the primary shapers of its foreign policy and military doctrine.

In addition, Iran's ongoing nuclear program is primarily directed at the United States and other regional threats more than at Israel.[1] The Islamic Republic views the United States as its chief military, political, economic, and ideological rival. Iran's drive toward a nuclear weapons program is not so much a reaction to Israeli nuclear capabilities but a result of the regime's threat perception of the United States and other regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia. This is not to say that Iranian leaders do not view Israel as a major regional rival and threat; the Ira-

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[1] Nevertheless, Israel is an increasingly important factor in Iran's nuclear program, as nuclear weapons would arguably serve as a deterrent against an Israeli attack on Iran. Ironically, Iran's development of a nuclear program is the reason for Israeli military threats against the Islamic Republic.

nian regime has been hostile toward Israel from the very beginning of the Islamic revolution. And Iran has found its anti-Israel stance to be a useful card over the years in its outreach to Arab masses to undermine the legitimacy and popularity of pro-American leaders. However, until the last decade, it viewed its rivalry with Israel in a less confrontational and more limited fashion. But Iran's evolving political system and the Middle East's geopolitical transformation in the last decade has changed the nature of the rivalry.

The Islamic Republic's conception of and behavior toward Israel has been shaped by three key factors: regime perceptions of the United States as its most significant adversary and a belief in the near symmetry of Israeli and U.S. interests as they relate to Iran; deep-seated ideological hostility toward Israel; and the geopolitical benefits of overt hostility toward Israel, especially vis-à-vis Iran's Arab neighbors. These factors have driven Iran's rivalry with Israel but have also induced a certain degree of restraint on its part. However, the Middle East's geopolitical transformation since 2003, the ascent of the principlists (fundamentalists) and the Revolutionary Guards, in addition to Iran's continuing nuclear program have changed the dynamics of the Israeli-Iranian rivalry, increasing the potential for a direct and much more dangerous conflict. The Islamic Republic increasingly views the United States as less able to challenge its influence while it views Israel as its primary regional nemesis.

This chapter first discusses factors shaping Iranian threat perceptions, including regime ideology and geostrategic competition. It then discusses the effects of Iran's factionalized political system on its policies toward Israel, paying particular attention to the rise of the Revolutionary Guards and the principlists The chapter concludes by considering how a nuclear-armed Iran may behave toward Israel and examining possible Iranian policies under various future regimes.

Regime Ideology and Geostrategic Factors Shape Iranian Threat Perceptions of Israel

Iran Views U.S. and Israeli Interests as Nearly Identical

The Islamic Republic's threat perception of Israel has been historically determined not through direct rivalry between the two countries but by the enmity between Iran and the United States. The regime views U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East, particularly regarding Iran, as nearly identical, especially given the perception of Israel's influence in U.S. decisionmaking. The regime's conspiratorial and often anti-Semitic views of how the world works are largely responsible for this perception.[2]

Iranian leaders see the United States as the primary threat to the regime's existence. This perception is rooted in the history of U.S. involvement in Iran, including the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected government in 1953 and subsequent U.S. support for Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi—a man viewed by many Iranians as a "puppet" of the West, the United States, and Israel.[3] Thus, Iranian ideological hostility toward Israel is rooted in the perception of the United States and Israel as paragons of "imperialism" in the Middle East.[4]

The Islamic Republic and the United States have competed for regional influence since the 1979 revolution. The rivalry between the

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[2] Karim Sadjadpour writes: "Like Khomeini's, Khamenei's writings and speeches present arguably the most accurate reflection of Iranian domestic and foreign policy aims and actions. They depict a resolute Leader with a remarkably consistent and coherent—though highly cynical and conspiratorial—world view." See Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader,* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008.

Even the former Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, shared some of these conspiratorial world views. In an October 1976 interview with Mike Wallace/CBS 60 Minutes, the Shah criticized "American Jews" for their presumed control over U.S. media and finance.

[3] The 1953 coup, though organized by the United States and the United Kingdom, was supported by a significant section of the Iranian clergy and population.

[4] For background on Iran's strategic culture and views of the United States, see David E. Thaler, Alireza Nader, Shahram Chubin, Jerrold D. Green, Charlotte Lynch, and Frederic M. Wehrey, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-878-OSD, 2010.

two has taken on new dimensions with the revelation of Iran's nuclear facilities in 2002 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Iran's pursuit of a potential nuclear weapons program and its support for insurgent terrorist groups such as Lebanese Hizballah, Shi'a insurgents in Iraq, and even the Taliban in Afghanistan are the major sources of current tension between the two nations.

Moreover, the regime's top echelon, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and senior Revolutionary Guards officers, believe that the United States is engaged in "total" warfare against the Islamic Republic. According to this viewpoint, the United States has never accepted the legitimacy of the Islamic revolution, which established an "independent" Iran not beholden to U.S. interests. Thus, any U.S. policy toward Iran aims to undermine Iran's revolution, the Islamic Republic's progress, and its resistance to U.S. domination of the Middle East. Unable to achieve regime change through military force alone, Iranian leaders view the United States as engaged in a velvet revolution to overthrow the regime. The perceived U.S. strategy includes sanctions, psychological and cultural warfare, and the fomenting of internal instability in Iran.[5] In a September 2009 speech to the Assembly of Experts, Khamenei remarked:

> The Islamic regime has thirty years of experience in countering various challenges. But, as the regime makes progress and scores achievements in complicated issues, the conspiracies of the opponents also become more complicated. It is important to understand different dimensions and implications of the conspiracies in order to succeed . . . the current situation is a psychological warfare or a soft warfare. They have come to oppose the Islamic regime. And in this war the main goal of the enemy is to transform the strengths of the regime into weaknesses and vulnerabilities. . . .[6]

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[5] Iranian leaders have reacted coolly to Obama's Norouz messages to Iran and its government, stating that the United States must demonstrate changes in policy through actions rather than words. See "Khamenei's Response to Obama's Norouz Message," March 2011.

[6] "Toteh Barnam e Rizi Shodeh Pass As Entekhabat be Samt Tarahan An Kamaneh Kard" (Conspiracy After the Elections), Fars News Agency, obtained from Irantracker.org, translated by Ali Alfoneh, American Enterprise Institute, September 24, 2009.

Such thinking shapes Iranian policies toward Israel, especially since the Iranian regime believes that Israeli and U.S. interests in the Middle East are largely identical; erstwhile allies of the Shah, Israel, and the United States are opposed to the Islamic Republic for ideological reasons[7] and wish to overthrow it to achieve "hegemony" in Iran and throughout the Middle East. In his speeches, Ayatollah Khamenei conflates U.S. and Israeli interests regarding Iran and claims that the two are opposed to the "essence" of the Islamic Republic as a political system. He also claims that "Zionist think-tanks" control U.S. policy toward Iran.[8]

Such views are not restricted to conservative regime ideologues. In a 1998 CNN interview, then-President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist and relative moderate, stated:

> Obviously, Washington is the U.S. capital where policy decision on U.S. national interests must be made. However, the impression of the people of the Middle East and Muslims in general is that certain foreign policy decisions of the U.S. are in fact made in Tel Aviv and not in Washington . . . we believe the United States should not risk the substantial prestige and credibility of the American people on supporting a racist regime which does not even have the backing of the Jewish people.[9]

This type of thinking is intensified by the regime's conspiratorial and anti-Semitic views of how the world works.[10] The Iranian regime repeatedly blames Israel or the "Zionists" for the U.S. stance toward Iran. According to Iran's official media,

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[7]   David Menashri, *Iran After Khomeini: Revolutionary Ideology vs. National Interests* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, Israel: The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, Tel Aviv University, 1999. Menashari notes that Iran's hostile relations with Israel are rooted to some extent in the close ties that existed between Israel and the Shah's regime.

[8]   See Khamenei speech, August 27, 2010.

[9]   "Transcript of Interview with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami," CNN.com, January 7, 1998.

[10]   "Hamish e Yek Pay e Yahudi Dar Miyan Ast" (There Is Always a Jewish Hand Involved), *Basirat News,* July 8, 2010.

Obama's election goaded some into hoping that he would break with Bush's mistaken policies on Iran and the Middle East. . . . While Obama's political rhetoric is systematically different from that of Bush, it seems the Zionist lobby, which places Israel's interests above those of the US, does not allow him enough elbow room to even adopt a less biased policy toward the Middle East.[11]

Some analysts and reporters portray Israeli threat perceptions of Iran's nuclear program and subsequent policies toward Iran (such as potential military action) as diverging from U.S. interests and policies (see Chapter Three). However, such nuances are lost on Iranian decisionmakers. They believe that Israeli and U.S. objectives are fundamentally the same and that U.S. hostility toward Iran is due to Israel's strategic interests, therefore dictating any U.S. action.

The regime's perceptions of U.S. policy on the Iranian nuclear program are a case in point. According to Ali Larijani, speaker of Iran's parliament and former national security advisor and lead nuclear negotiator, UN sanctions against Iran are "spearheaded by the Zionist lobby."[12] Iran's elite believe that international sanctions and other coercive measures against Iran are in large part driven by Israeli interests and executed by the United States, rather than by larger concerns shared by much of the international community.

The Regime Views Israel as Undermining Its Stability

The Iranian regime regularly blames Israel and the United States for fomenting internal instability in Iran. The perception of Israeli machinations against the regime has become much stronger in the past decade, mainly as a result of Israeli opposition to Iran's nuclear program and the regime's sense of vulnerability after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the protests following the 2009 presidential election. It is reasonable to assume that the regime places the blame on Israel to absolve itself of Iran's myriad social, economic, and political problems;

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[11] "Hurdles in US-Iran Talks," Press TV, August 20, 2010.

[12] "Speaker Blames Zionist Lobby for Iran's Sanctions Resolution," Fars News Agency, June 15, 2010.

Israel is, after all, a convenient "other" for the Islamic Republic. However, there is evidence to suggest that Iran's leaders believe that Israel is actually instigating unrest throughout Iran. The Stuxnet attacks and the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, widely blamed on Israel, have reinforced this perception of Israel. Hence, Israeli "interference" is plausible given past and current Israeli actions in Iran, as seen by the regime.

Iran's leaders accuse Israel of supporting several antirevolutionary groups, including the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO). The MKO is perhaps one of the most visible antiregime groups outside Iran. It has operated from Iraq since 1986, though its operations have been restricted by the U.S. government and by the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government after Saddam's overthrow.[13] Iran's leaders have accused Israel (and the United States) of helping the MKO in its antiregime operations.[14] Though there is little available public evidence, some speculate that Israel used the MKO as a conduit to reveal Iran's secret nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak in 2002.[15] Any significant connection between Israel and the MKO is open to question; nevertheless, the Iranian regime believes that Israel supports one of its most committed foes.[16]

More important, and even less plausible, the Iranian regime has accused the opposition Green Movement of receiving support from Israel. The Green Movement was born after Iran's 2009 disputed presidential election.[17] Its leaders consist of reformist revolutionaries such

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[13] The MKO's position in Iraq is quite tenuous, however. The MKO also has very insignificant popular support among the Iranian population. See Jeremiah E. Goulka, Lydia Hansell, Elizabeth Wilkes, and Judith Larson, *The Mujadedin-e Khalq in Iraq: A Policy Conundrum*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-871-OSD, 2009.

[14] "Seditionists Collaborate with Zionists to Overthrow Islamic Republic," Fars News Agency, February 2, 2011.

[15] Scott Ritter, *Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change,* New York: Nation Books, 2006.

[16] Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iran executes alleged Israeli spy," *Financial Times*, December 28, 2010.

[17] See Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future,* Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House Publishing, 2011.

as former Prime Minister Mir Hussein Mousavi, former speaker of Parliament Mehdi Karroubi, and former President Mohammad Khatami. The Green Movement derives much of its support from not only reformists but from other sectors of Iranian society, including the more secular middle classes. The Green Movement's initial goal was to protest Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection. However, it is increasingly questioning the legitimacy of the entire political system under Khamenei, posing a direct threat to his rule. In turn, Khamenei has labeled the Green Movement a seditious group sponsored by Israel and the United States. Again, the regime's depiction of the Green Movement as a "Zionist tool" may help it shore up support from Iranians suspicious of foreign influence. However, Khamenei may actually believe that the "sedition" is supported by foreign powers. In response to anti-regime demonstrations in February 2011, former foreign minister and Khamenei confidant Ali Akbar Velayati stated his conviction "that Mousavi and Karroubi have connections to foreign powers," including the "Zionist regime."[18] This fits in with the conspiratorial worldview that informs the regime's perceptions of Israel and the United States.

In addition, the regime has accused Israel of supporting Kurdish and Baluchi rebels. The regime appears convinced that the Kurdish Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) and Baluchi group Jundullah receive external support from Israel and the United States.[19] From the regime's perspective, past Israeli involvement with the region's Kurds translates into present support for such groups as PJAK (both the Shah and Israel provided support to Kurdish rebels fighting Saddam Hussein the 1970s). Iran has consistently accused Israel of using Iraqi Kurdistan (now ruled by the Kurdish Regional Government) as a base for operations against Iranian border territories inhabited by restive Kurds.[20]

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[18] "Tardid nadaram ke Mousavi va Karroubi Ba Biganegan dar ertebat hastand" (I have no doubt that Mousavi and Karroubi are connected with the foreigners), Mashregh News, February 11, 2011.

[19] "Iran mosque blast bears US, Israel thumbprints," Press TV, May 29, 2009. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are also cited by the regime as foreign supporters of the Baluchi insurgents.

[20] See Seymour Hersh, "The Next Act," *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2006. The United States designated PJAK as a terrorist group in February 2010

Jundullah's killing of senior Guards officers has particularly riled the regime.[21] The Revolutionary Guards are responsible for providing military aid and training to such groups as Hamas and Hizballah. The regime may believe that Israeli "support" to the Kurds and Baluchis is in response to its support for Hizballah.

The U.S. "Threat" Determines Iran's Military Posture Against Israel

Iran's rivalry with the United States shapes its national security and military posture toward Israel. Hence, Iran's overall deterrence strategy against the United States motivates its support for various "proxy" groups such as Hizballah. Several factors drive Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, including the survival of the regime. A nuclear weapons capability could also help the regime expand its regional power and counter Israel's conventional and nuclear military capabilities.[22] Furthermore, the nuclear program has become a source of pride for the Iranian regime, as it demonstrates Iran's technological ability and self-sufficiency in the face of U.S. and international sanctions. Iran's nuclear program, therefore, is not a product of its direct rivalry with Israel, even if Iranian leaders may see some deterrence value from its nuclear program vis-à-vis Israel.

Iran has adopted a military doctrine that incorporates asymmetry in the face of superior U.S. conventional capabilities. The Islamic Republic relies on the Revolutionary Guards' specialized Qods Force and various "proxy" groups such as Hizballah and Iraqi Shi'a insurgents to deter U.S. military aggression. In addition, Iran's naval strategy demonstrates the use of asymmetric tactics (swarming fast boats, mines) meant to inflict damage on the U.S. Navy and possibly interfere with shipping in the Persian Gulf.[23] Iran, lacking a technologically

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[21] See Alireza Nader and Joya Laha, "Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan," Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-322-MCIA, 2011.

[22] See Lynn E. Davis, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader, Dalia Dassa Kaye, J. T. Quinlivan, and Paul Steinberg, *Iran's Nuclear Future: Critical U.S. Policy Choices,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1087-AF, 2011.

[23] Office of Naval Intelligence, *Iran's Naval Forces: From Guerilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy*, Suitland, Md., Fall 2009.

advanced air force, also relies on a large missile force to deter attacks and retaliate against the United States and the GCC in case of a military conflict.

Iran's military doctrine toward Israel closely parallels its strategy toward the United States. The Islamic Republic is incapable of effectively countering Israel's air superiority, especially in the event of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear installations. Thus, Iran relies on such groups as Hizballah and Hamas to ward off an Israeli attack or to retaliate against Israel in time of war. In addition to developing missiles capable of hitting Israel from Iranian territory, Iran has also supplied Hizballah, Hamas, and Syria with thousands of short-range and medium-range missiles. The 2006 conflict between Hizballah and Israel, widely viewed by all sides as a proxy war between Iran and Israel, demonstrated Iran's potential military doctrine against Israel in the event of a direct military conflict.

In addition, Iran appears to view Israel as a useful point of leverage in the event of conflict with the United States. Its development of ballistic missiles can intimidate the GCC states and deter them from supporting a U.S. military invasion of Iran. However, the Iranian regime also sees Israel as an important source of vulnerability for the United States; by targeting Israel, Iran hopes to deter the United States from attacking Iran. This reflects Iran's traditional viewpoint of U.S. and Israeli interests as being closely aligned, if not identical.

This belief could influence Iran's future nuclear doctrine. The regime could view Israel, which is much more vulnerable to a nuclear strike than the United States, as an American Achilles' heel in a future nuclear standoff. Official Iranian statements reveal the regime's thinking to some extent. In a 2001 speech, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani remarked that "If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything."[24] Rafsanjani went on to say that such

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[24] "Rafsanjani's Qods Day speech (Jerusalem Day)," *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Tehran (Persian), translated by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, original broadcast December 14, 2001.

an event "will only harm the Islamic world,"[25] but he must have been aware of the reaction his words would produce in Israel and the United States. Ahmadinejad's rhetoric against Israel also reflects the regime's overall thinking; by threatening Israel's existence, Ahmadinejad is not only playing to his own domestic (fundamentalist) constituents but exploiting Israel's fears and U.S. reactions to Iran's rhetoric, potentially creating an effective deterrence in the face of the U.S. "threat" to the regime.

Iran Increasingly Views Israel as a Direct Geopolitical Threat

The Islamic Republic did not always view Israel as a direct and immediate geopolitical rival. As discussed above, Iran's enmity with the United States and an ideology of "resistance" against "U.S. and Zionist imperialism" were the primary shapers of the Iranian-Israeli rivalry. Opposition to Israel also served Iran's geopolitical interests in the Arab world. Iran's anti-Israeli rhetoric and its support for both Shi'a and Sunni militants enhance its appeal among the region's Arab populations.

The regime did not see Israel as a direct threat to Iran's national security, though the "Zionist" lobby influenced U.S. decisionmaking regarding Iran. It instead saw Baathist Iraq and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia as the greatest threats to its interests throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Iran's preoccupation with Iraq and the GCC at that time even facilitated limited cooperation with Israel, as evidenced by Iran's purchase of Israeli arms (see Chapter Two).

However, Israel has become a more direct geopolitical and military rival over the last decade. There are several reasons for this development. The first is the geopolitical transformation of the Middle East in the last ten years. The U.S. overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 and Saddam Hussein in 2003 has left Iran with no other regional rivals, possibly with the exception of Saudi Arabia. Israel thus rises to the top of Iran's local enemies list. The 2011 Arab uprisings, which have forced Arab regimes to focus on their internal turmoil, only reinforce such strategic trends, at least temporarily.

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[25] "Rafsanjani's Qods Day speech (Jerusalem Day)," 2001.

In addition, Hizballah's rise in Lebanon and Syria's closer ties with the Islamic Republic have made Iran a key player in the Levant. This has brought the competition between Iran and Israel into sharper focus and the Iranian threat closer to Israel's borders. Moreover, Iran's development of increasingly sophisticated ballistic missiles and a potential nuclear weapons capability poses a direct threat to Israel that is no longer purely asymmetric in nature.

As discussed, Iranian views of Israel as a geopolitical competitor have shifted over time. Iran's post-revolution foreign policy was at first overzealous and ideological. The very existence of Israel was an affront to the anti-imperialist fervor that had captured the Iranian revolutionary psyche. Iran's new rulers saw Israel as an outpost of Western colonialism. For them, Zionism was an imperialist ideology rather than the Jewish quest for a homeland. Nevertheless, Iran's new rulers were also mindful of geopolitical realities. The Islamic Republic was not in a position to fight a strong state such as Israel while fighting Saddam Hussein. Indirect conflict and tacit cooperation with Israel served regime interests.

This approach to Israel characterized Iranian decisionmaking throughout the 1980s. However, Iran's position toward Israel began to shift in the 1990s. Saddam Hussein's defeat by the United States in 1991 greatly reduced his threat to the Iranian regime. In addition, Iran pursued conciliatory policies toward the Arab world following the end of the Iran-Iraq war and Khomeini's death in 1989. Iran emerged as less isolated, decreasing the need for an Israeli counterweight to its Arab rivals. More important, the 1993 Oslo Accords and the possibility of peace between Israel and the Arabs deeply concerned Tehran, which viewed opposition to Israel as a cornerstone of its Arab policy. Hence, Iran increased support to such groups as Hamas and Islamic Jihad and played a significant role in instigating attacks against Israel before and during the Second Intifada.[26] Israel, having fought Iranian "proxies" in Lebanon, had to confront Iranian-backed groups in its own territory.

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[26] Rachel Brandenburg, "The Iran Primer: Iran and the Palestinians," United States Institute of Peace, October 28, 2010.

The transformation of regional geopolitics in the last decade has propelled the Iranian-Israeli strategic rivalry to new heights. Iraq no longer stands as a bulwark against Iranian ambitions. The current Iraqi government, dominated by such Shi'a parties as al Dawa, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and the Sadrists, is more likely to pursue pro-Iranian or at least less anti-Iranian policies in the near future. Given its internal instability and close ties to the Iranian regime, it is not clear if Iraq will have the intention or capacity to challenge Iranian power in the Persian Gulf.

Iranian "successes" in the Middle East have in large part been due to what are often referred to as Iran's "proxy" groups in the region. These groups include Hizballah, Hamas, and various Iraqi Shi'a insurgents. However, many of them, especially Hizballah and Hamas, are relatively autonomous actors with their own political objectives. Hizballah, for instance, has been transformed from an Iranian-created militia into Lebanon's most powerful political and military actor. It wishes to portray itself as a Lebanese *national* party rather than an Iranian-controlled proxy group.

The political and ideological objectives of Hamas also diverge from Iranian interests. Hamas is a Sunni group with ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood; it has little ideological affinity for revolutionary Shi'a Iran. The leaders and the rank and file of Hamas may even consider that their goals in Palestine may be diminished by Iran's use of the group in its fight with Israel. After all, the Iranian regime may not be interested in an independent Palestine per se but rather uses Palestinian groups in its conflict with the United States and Israel and, perhaps most important, with conservative Sunni Arab states. But Hamas has been largely driven into Iran's arms out of necessity; Iran is one of the few major Middle Eastern actors that is willing and eager to offer the group substantial financial and military assistance.

Nevertheless, much of the world, including Israel, view both Hizballah and Hamas as Iranian proxies. This has been useful for the Islamic Republic. Hizballah's ability to withstand Israeli assaults and inflict damage on Israel proper in 2006 demonstrated the "success" of Iranian military doctrine in the face of a much superior conventional military. Hizballah's military prowess demonstrated Iran's position as

a regional power to be reckoned with. Hizballah's conduct also won it and Iran praise across the Arab world.[27] Not since Egypt's Yom Kippur war against Israel in 1973 had an Arab armed force managed to counter Israel's military might.

Hizballah emerged as Lebanon's premier power broker after the 2005 Cedar Revolution and the subsequent Syrian military withdrawal. Both Iran and Hizballah had been more dependent on Syria before 2005; Iran is especially reliant on Syria as a weapons conduit to Hizballah. However, Syria's exit from Lebanon has made it much more dependent on Hizballah and Iran for influence in Lebanon and by extension made it a junior partner to Hizballah's patron, Iran. Syria also appears to have become more dependent on Iranian arms and asymmetric tactics, especially in light of Hizballah's "success" against Israel in 2006.[28]

Iran's regional influence also grew as a result of its support of Hamas and other Palestinian groups. Hamas's electoral victory in the West Bank and its subsequent takeover of the Gaza Strip made Iran an even bigger player in the Israeli-Arab conflict. Although not strictly an Iranian proxy, Hamas is nevertheless dependent on Iranian funding, training, and arms. Khalid Mashal, its leader in Damascus, appears to confer regularly with Iranian officials.[29]

Iran's support for Hamas and the weakening position of the Palestinian Authority may have made the "rejectionist" approach toward Israel more appealing among some Palestinians. Arab states such as Saudi Arabia also view Iran as having "stolen" the Palestinian "portfolio" from the Arab states.

Other regional developments could also increase the sense of competition between Iran and Israel. Turkey's strained relations with Israel

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[27] Fred Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dasa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer Li, *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-781-AF, 2009.

[28] Mona Yacoubian, "Syria's Alliance with Iran," United States Institute of Peace, May 2007.

[29] Mike Shuster, "Iranian Support for Hamas Running High Post-Gaza," National Public Radio, February 4, 2009.

and its growing ties with the Islamic Republic may mean that the officially secular Muslim state will no longer constrain Iranian ambitions. Though concerned about Iran's nuclear program, many Turkish officials and the population at large do not appear to view Iran as a direct threat.[30] Rather, Turkey appears to see Iran as an important regional player and a significant economic partner.[31] This may embolden Iran to pursue more assertive policies toward Israel if it feels that Turkey is "on its side."[32]

Perhaps more important, the seismic changes in the Arab world will significantly affect the Iranian-Israeli rivalry. It is too early to tell if Iran will benefit from the Arab uprising, particularly given the regime's own internal vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, Khamenei and other senior regime figures have compared Egypt's uprising to Iran's own revolution, which they claim will lead to the establishment of Islam (under Iran's leadership) as "a world power."[33] Though this may appear to be propaganda for popular consumption, Iranian leaders have nevertheless consistently overestimated Iran's power and capability.

In addition, Iran increasingly views the United States as a receding regional and even global player. Iran's growing self-confidence is apparent in its behavior, especially its naval presence beyond the Persian Gulf.[34] Its unprecedented decision to sail two war ships through the Suez Canal soon after the Egyptian uprising, though previously planned, was nevertheless an intended provocation of Israel and a signal of Iran's perceived ascendancy in the "post-American" Middle East order. It may also signal its sense of power vis-à-vis Israel. Accord-

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[30] "Turks See US, Israel as Threat," Al Arabiya News Channel, January 5, 2011.

[31] "Iran, Turkey Seek to Boost Economic Ties," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 2, 2011.

[32] Despite the Iranian regime's perceptions, Turkey could be in fact pursuing a policy that enhances its influence in the Middle East while constraining Iranian power. For example, Turkish engagement with Hamas may make it a valuable intermediary between "resistance" groups and the West, enhancing Turkey's position as a regional player.

[33] "Sardar Safavi: Enheraf Amrika Dar Enghelab e Mesr," Mashregh News, February 2, 2011.

[34] Ebrahim Gilani, "Iranian Navy Quietly Assertive," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, March 21, 2011.

ing to Basij Chief Mohammad-Reza Naghdi, Israel's "defeat" will be a surprise given that "the Egyptian and Jordanian nations are awakened and demand execution of divine law in their countries. . . . If the people of Egypt and Jordan continue the trend of their resistance, they will achieve victory in which case the Zionist regime will be encircled and the nations will avenge 60 years of crimes upon every Zionist in Palestine."[35]

Iran's continued pursuit of a potential nuclear weapons capability will only heighten the sense of competition with Israel. A nuclear-capable Iran will face only one real peer adversary—Israel (assuming that Iran's differences with Pakistan do not become more acute). In addition, the militarization of Iranian politics under the Revolutionary Guards and the rise of principlists will also fuel the rivalry. As will be discussed below, Iranian politics and decisionmaking are not completely monolithic. The regime may appear unified in its hostility and conduct toward Israel, but Iranian factional and institutional politics have restrained Iranian policies toward Israel. The control of the state bureaucracy by the pragmatic conservatives (1989–1997) and the reformists (1997–2005), for example, tempered regime hostility toward Israel. Ahmadinejad and the principlists, on the other hand, have done much to heighten tensions between Iran and Israel, with possibly disastrous consequences for both.

Domestic Politics Are a Strong Driver of Iranian Policies Toward Israel

Different Factions Have Varying Views of Israel
The changing nature of the Islamic regime is a contributing factor to the greater rivalry with Israel. The ascent of the Revolutionary Guards, the militarization of Iranian politics, and the monopolization of power by the principlists have reshaped the Islamic Republic's geopolitical calculations and overall behavior toward security issues such as Israel.

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[35] "Azadi Qods Qafelgir Konand e Ast" (Jerusalem's Liberation Will Be Surprise), *Jahan News,* February 2, 2011.

Iranian foreign policy has vacillated between pragmatism and ideology since the 1979 revolution. Foreign policy under President Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997) was relatively "pragmatic" in comparison to the early revolutionary days. The devastation of the Iran-Iraq war, the regime's ideological approach to policy, and its isolation from the rest of the world threatened the revolution's future success and the Islamic Republic's very existence. Rafsanjani, arguably more powerful than Khamenei in the early 1990s, favored a more privatized and globally integrated economy and better relations with Iran's neighboring states. The 1990s saw a thaw in Iran's relations with the Persian Gulf's Arab states. Iran also sought better relations with Europe and the United States. It is possible that Rafsanjani and his pragmatic conservative supporters viewed Israel in less ideological terms. To be sure, Iran's support for Hizballah and other rejectionist groups continued under Rafsanjani. Iran also pursued closer relations with Syria, Israel's committed foe.

Nevertheless, the ever-calculating Rafsanjani may have realized that a lessening of tensions between Iran and Israel could have eased relations between Iran and the United States. Rafsanjani and former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati both suggested in the late 1980s that Iran would not be opposed to Israel and the Palestinians working out a resolution that would please both sides.[36] Rafsanjani asserted that, "if the content of the peace plan [between Israel and the Palestinians] is just, the substance is just, we shall go along with it."[37]

However, Rafsanjani's hands were tied by Iran's fractious political system. Khamenei, who gradually attained more power as supreme leader in the mid-1990s, viewed the United States and Israel in ideological terms. Rafsanjani was mindful not only of Khamenei but of other hard-line figures within the Iranian political establishment, including those on the right and the left. It was one thing to reshape Iran's policies toward fellow Muslim countries and even Europe, but

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[36] Eric Hooglund, "Iranian Views of the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Autumn 1995, p. 88.

[37] Hooglund, 1995, p. 88. See also Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian National-Security Debates, Factionalism and Lost Opportunities," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, Summer 2007.

any sort of rapprochement with the United States was another matter. Moreover, one's stance toward Israel was the ultimate test of ideological purity. This may explain Rafsanjani's at times belligerent behavior toward Israel. The need to appear "tough" to anti-Israeli constituencies is perhaps the best explanation for his statement on the use of nuclear weapons against the Jewish state.

The reformists under President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) shared many of the pragmatic conservatives' political and economic objectives. In particular, they were eager to reform Iran's moribund political system and sought closer relations with the outside world. Under Khatami, Iran made progress toward improving relations with the Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and other GCC nations. Iran's relations with Europe also improved substantially. Not all reformists adhered to the "liberation" ideology that had framed Iranian politics since the revolution. Rather, they believed that the Islamic Republic should strengthen itself at home and not expand its energies on adventures abroad. This is not to say that the reformists were better disposed toward Israel. Key reformist figures had been at the forefront of Iran's "resistance" toward Israel and played a great role in creating and empowering Hizballah. Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, an influential figure within the reformist movement considered by principlists to be the enemy of the current regime, was a founder of Hizballah, one-time ambassador to Syria, and a key policymaker on Israel (he survived an assassination attempt blamed on Israel).[38]

Despite their ideological origins, the reformists are now a relatively moderate force within Iranian politics. Khatami has even stated that Iran would accept a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians. According to Khatami, "any step for the realization of a real and just peace in the Middle East is positive and we will honor what the Palestinian people accept."[39] This is a far cry from the regime's often-

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[38] Shahryar Sadr, "How Hezbollah Founder Fell Foul of the Regime," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, IRN Issue 43, July 8, 2010.

[39] Mohammad Khatami, "Iran to Respect Any Palestinian Decision for Peace," *Al Bawaba News,* March 16, 2002.

resolute rejectionist ideology. Khatami even went as far to shake hands with Israel's then-president, Moshe Katsav.[40]

However, the reformist president was greatly constrained by domestic realities. He had some control over state bureaucracy, including the Foreign Ministry. But the principlists opposed to Khatami's reformist agenda controlled key military and security organs, including the powerful Revolutionary Guards. Khatami did not necessarily authorize Iranian military aid to Hizballah and Palestinian militants. Indeed, Israel's 2002 interception of the ship Karin A, loaded with Iranian weapons meant for Palestinian groups fighting Israel, could have been an attempt by Iranian principlists to sabotage Khatami's reform efforts.

The Ascent of the Principlists Has Led to Greater Rivalry

Iranian hostility toward Israel has peaked since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005.[41] A principlist devoted to the "ideals" of the Islamic Revolution, Ahmadinejad has taken a harsh approach toward Israel. He has spoken of "wiping" Israel off the map and has consistently undermined peace efforts by attacking Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian leaders.[42]

Ahmadinejad may genuinely believe in his own rhetoric toward Israel. However, his approach toward Israel also has domestic political implications. Much like Rafsanjani and Khatami, Ahmadinejad must steer the ship of state despite challenges from pragmatic conservatives, reformists, and principlists within his own camp. His statements on Israel, motivated by ideology, are also meant to satisfy other principlists on foreign policy issues.

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[40] Khatami later denied that any exchange had taken place between the two. "Iran denies contact with Israel," BBC News, April 9, 2005. Katsav was born in the Iranian city of Yazd, which is also Khatami's hometown.

[41] This hostility has taken an increasingly anti-Semitic dimension. The Iranian regime has traditionally tolerated Iran's Jewish population, but pressures against Iranian Jews may increase in the future under even more fundamentalist governments. See Meir Javedanfar, "Iranian government stirs up anti-Semitism with invented massacre," December 27, 2010.

[42] Ian Black, "Middle East Peace Talks Are 'Doomed to Fail,' Says Ahmadinejad," *The Guardian UK*, September 3, 2010.

But Ahmadinejad's reprehensible rhetoric does not completely mask the contradictions within the principlist camp and the Islamic Republic as a system of governance. Though he is ideologically opposed to the United States, Ahmadinejad may still realize the need for some type of accommodation with the regime's greatest nemesis and even, perhaps, Israel. Ahmadinejad's close confidant, advisor, and inlaw, Esfandiar Rahim-Mashai, demonstrated some of the tensions between ideology and more pragmatic state interests. In a 2008 speech, Mashai stated that Iran was a friend to all people, including the Israeli people.[43]

His statement may have reflected a wish to ease tensions with the United States; Ahmadinejad has been reported to be more in favor of dialogue with the United States than other conservative regime figures have been. Mashai, however, was roundly condemned by the principlist camp. Khamenei stated that Iran was opposed not only to Israel as a state but to the Israeli people as well.[44]

The aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential election saw the marginalization of the reformist/pragmatic conservative movement and the near monopolization of power by the principlists. The rise of the principlists and the Revolutionary Guards has important implications for the Israeli-Iranian rivalry. The pragmatic conservatives and reformists imposed some restraint on Iran's anti-Israel ideology, rhetoric, and behavior, whereas most principlists appear to have had no such inclinations. The March 2011 "resignation" of Rafsanjani from the Assembly of Experts was the latest purge of non-principlists opposed to Ahmadinejad. Rafsanjani, who still heads the influential Expediency Council, is one of the few pragmatic individuals of influence left within the regime. His marginalization from the machinery of power, along with the purging of reformist/pragmatic technocrats from the national security bureaucracy, will greatly weaken pragmatic trends within the Islamic Republic.

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[43] "VP: Leader right about Israel," Press TV, September 20, 2008.

[44] After the 2009 election, President Ahmadinejad appointed Mashai to position of first vice president. The decision revealed significant internal ideological fissures, as Ahmadinejad quickly came under siege by hardliners who were extremely critical of his selection.

The Revolutionary Guards' role in Iranian decisionmaking will only increase Iran's threat perceptions of Israel and lead to greater competition between the two nations. Khamenei has used the Guards as a bulwark against the reformists and pragmatic conservatives. The Guards Corps has been rewarded with enormous economic, political, and military power. The Guards played a critical role in Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 and again in 2009. They have also played a key role in containing Ahmadinejad after his April 2011 public challenge to Khamenei. Khamenei also relies on the Guards for shaping Iran's national security strategy. The Guards' specialized Qods (Jerusalem) Force, responsible for training Hizballah and Hamas, has had a large role in determining and implementing policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Its chief, General Qasem Soleimani, appears to be a major strategist and decisionmaker.

The Guards Corps, especially the Qods Force, is more hostile toward Israel than other government institutions. It controls Iran's missile forces and would most likely command Iran's nuclear weapons if the regime decided to weaponize the nuclear program. As the vanguard of the "resistance" to Israel, it is more likely to view Iran's nuclear capability more aggressively vis-à-vis Israel. Principlists within the Guards view the United States as a declining power and Iran as the Middle East's ascendant power. According to one senior Guards commander, "the United States is in a state of decline" because of internal issues such as the banking crisis.[45] This sense of self-confidence may embolden the Islamic Republic to directly challenge Israel, the U.S. chief regional ally. Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami,[46] an influential principlist cleric with strong ties to the Guards, believes that "Today, the US is bogged down in the quagmires of Afghanistan and Iraq and the notion that Israel is unbeatable no longer holds true."[47]

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[45] "Jang Jahani e Sevom Shrou Shod e ast" (World War Three Has Started), *Ebtekar News,* October 6, 2010.

[46] No relation to former president Mohammad Khatami.

[47] "US Bogged Down in Iraq, Afghanistan Quagmires," Fars News Agency, November 17, 2010.

This does not mean that Iran would be willing to use nuclear weapons against Israel; the Guards Corps is well aware of Israel's nuclear capabilities and is chiefly interested in preserving the regime and its own political and economic prerogatives. However, given its close ties to Hizballah and Hamas, it is more likely to threaten nuclear use in the case of conflict between Israel and Iran's "proxies," especially since it sees those groups as the first line of defense against Israel.

Despite the Guards' ascendancy, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, will make the ultimate decisions regarding Israel. Khamenei has stated his vociferous opposition to Israel's existence numerous times. Such pronouncements appear to be genuine and motivated by personal belief. However, they also serve Khamenei's political and strategic objectives. He has benefitted tremendously from his close association with the principlists and the Revolutionary Guards, and his stance toward Israel garners support from this critical political base. In addition, Khamenei is cognizant of Israel's utility in enhancing Iran's "leadership" in the region. He has warned repeatedly against Sunni-Shi'a rivalries that could contain Iranian power and even lead to internal instability. Hence, a sustainable rivalry with Israel that would preclude a massive war affecting the Iranian homeland would ultimately benefit the regime.

It is not clear how Khamenei views Iran's potential nuclear weapons capability and its possible use against Israel. Despite his ideological hostility toward the United States and Israel, he tends to be a cautious leader who makes decisions based on cost and benefit calculations meant to ensure the survival of his regime. For example, Iran has developed its nuclear program in the last two decades within the parameters of the NPT, despite the mounting political and economic costs. It does not appear that Khamenei is rushing toward the assembly of nuclear weapons, as this would greatly increase international pressure on the regime. However, he may support Iran's ongoing nuclear weapons development as a means to protect the regime and enhance its regional power in the long term. Nevertheless, Khamenei appears to believe that the rivalry between Iran and Israel is heating up and that the two

nations are on a "collision course."[48] In addition, his dependence on the principlists and the Revolutionary Guards may limit the "pragmatic" aspects of future decisionmaking on Israel. Khamenei is rumored to be in poor health, though he is relatively young at the age of 71. The succession to Khamenei is uncertain; however, his passing may portend a period of chaos and uncertainty, perhaps more dangerous if Iran possesses nuclear capabilities. The future nature of the Islamic Republic, if it is to exist in the next few years, will be a crucial factor in the Iranian-Israeli rivalry.

A Future Regime May View Israel Differently

Iran's relationship with Israel was dramatically transformed by the 1979 revolution. It is at times difficult to remember the degree of cooperation that existed between Iran and Israel in the prerevolutionary era. The current state of affairs between Iran and Israel bring to mind images of hate, war, and the possibility of nuclear annihilation. Yet Israel and Iran were de facto allies not too long ago.

The creation of the Islamic Republic ended the Iranian-Israeli alliance but not all cooperation. Indeed, eternal hostility between Iran and Israel is not a forgone conclusion. However, the strategic rivalry between the two powers is more likely to intensify in the near future given the current configuration of leadership in Tehran.

Nonetheless, it is unclear that a future regime will continue to see the utility of a continued rivalry. Iran and Israel are not natural rivals; they do not border each other and do not compete for resources. Iran's national security interests are focused on the Persian Gulf region rather than on the Levant. Its main regional rivals have consisted of Baathist Iraq and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia rather than Israel. Indeed, it is not too farfetched to assume that Iran and Israel can one day become allies again, rather than direct rivals.

A future Iranian regime may view Israel much differently. A post-Khamenei political system that is more militarized, ideological, and aggressive may view overt conflict with Israel as beneficial. However,

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[48] Ramin Mostaghim and Borzou Daragahi, "Iran leader talks tough on Israel," *Los Angeles Times,* September 20, 2008.

Iran under the Green Movement may take Iranian policy in an entirely different direction. Though much diminished by the wave of arrests and intimidation after the 2009 election, the Green Movement still represents the aspiration of many Iranians dissatisfied with the political status quo. Supporters of the Green Movement, which include the young, the professional classes, students, women's rights groups, ethnic minorities, and even sectors of the clergy, believe in a less isolated and more open and democratic Iran. Their desire for political reform is echoed by calls for a different sort of foreign policy. Protest cries of "our lives are for Iran, not Lebanon and Palestine" were common during the 2009 post-election demonstrations.[49] Such sentiments do not necessarily reflect lack of sympathy for Iranians' co-religionists but antipathy toward Iranian support for Hizballah and Hamas.

Iran is more likely to moderate its policies toward Israel under a future regime dominated not by principlist Guards officers but by the reformist Green Movement and pragmatic conservatives such as Rafsanjani. This does not translate into reconciliation or close cooperation with Israel, as was the case during the Shah's reign. Many reformists share the principlists' ideological hostility toward Israel.[50] However, Iran may take a less hostile stance toward Israel by moderating its rhetoric or decreasing its political, economic, and military aid to Hamas and Hizballah. Hence, Iran's policy toward Israel may be characterized not by outright rejection and "resistance" but by more passive moral support for the Palestinians, possibly including acceptance of a two-nation solution.

The demise of the Islamic Republic and the creation of a more democratic and secular political system may lead to an even more fundamental shift toward Israel. The regime's rather narrow set of interests are the main cause of overt hostility toward Israel; the absence of an authoritarian Islamic political system obviates the need for outright

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[49] "Overview of Iran's Day of Protest," Radio Zamaneh, September 19, 2009.

[50] Zahra Rahnavard, Mousavi's wife and a prominent Green Movement leader in her own right, has called Israel "our eternal enemy." "Rahnavard: Seda va Sima Bi Tarafan e va Sharafatmandan e Raftar Konda" (The Voice and Vision Should Behave Neutrally and Honorably), Iranian Students' News Agency, May 19, 2009.

hostility toward the Jewish state.[51] Indeed, a secular, democratic, and most likely nationalistic Iran may even benefit from some level of tacit cooperation with Israel given each country's preoccupation with neighboring Arab states.

Of course, such a scenario exists in the realm of possibility rather than immediate reality. The Iranian regime has been thus far resilient in the face of domestic pressures. The nuclear program continues despite repeated obstacles, and Iran provides significant support to Hamas and Hizballah. Nevertheless, the Middle East is a rapidly changing landscape; the Iranian regime is not immune from the forces that have resulted in the overthrow of Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak. It is possible that the Iranian-Israeli rivalry, with all its possibilities of war and bloodshed, could change into a relationship that serves U.S., Israeli, and Iranian interests once again.

Conclusion

Israel and Iran are not natural rivals. They have no territorial disputes and do not compete economically. The Islamic revolution, however, created a rivalry that has served the Iranian regime's political and foreign policy interests. Regime hostility toward Israel is motivated by ideology; Israel is a paragon of the same "imperialism" that had subjugated the Iranian nation under the Shah. But "resistance" against Israel has also been useful geopolitically by enhancing Iran's image among the region's Arab population and undermining the legitimacy of conservative Arab regimes.

Iran's pragmatic dealings with Israel did not end with the Shah's overthrow, however. Indeed, the Islamic Republic saw Israel as a useful counterweight to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Tacit arms purchases from Israel benefited a regionally and internationally isolated Iran. Iranian policy produced contradictions: On one hand, Iran armed and trained Hizballah, while on the other, it purchased weapons from Israel.

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[51] However, a secular and democratic political system may not produce an overt Iranian alliance with Israel. Even the Shah, allied with the United States, was wary of Iran's close relationship with Israel.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war and Saddam's defeat by the United States in 1991 decreased the utility of the secret Israeli-Iranian relationship. Nevertheless, Iranian leaders still viewed Israel as a distant but manageable threat handled through third parties such as Hizballah and, eventually, Hamas. There were event hints of rapprochement during the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.

But in the Iranian regime's eyes, Israel has become a direct threat to Iran's national security and sense of power in the last decade. Iranian leaders, particularly Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, perceive U.S. and Israeli interests to be nearly identical. According to this viewpoint, the United States is bent on regime change in Iran, a policy driven by the "Zionist lobby" in Washington, D.C. Israel is also seen as directly undermining the stability of a vulnerable regime by aiding opposition groups.

Moreover, the Iranian regime views the United States as a power in decline. Iran's leaders believe that U.S. strength has been sapped by the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to the U.S. financial crisis. The Arab uprisings of 2011 are also seen as eroding U.S. power in the Middle East.

The marginalization of Iran's pragmatic leadership in favor of the principlists and the Revolutionary Guards in the past decade has also enhanced Iranian threat perceptions of Israel. The Guards, responsible for training and arming Hizballah and Hamas, may feel emboldened by a potential Iranian nuclear weapons capability. The eventual passing of Khamenei may produce an Iran completely controlled by the Guards, increasing the possibility of overt conflict with Israel.

However, the Iranian regime is not immune from the same forces that toppled Arab regimes from Tunisia to Egypt. The possible emergence of an Iran ruled by the Green Movement or even the eventual demise of the Islamic Republic may translate into less hostile policies toward the United States and Israel. A secular and democratic Iran may even end the rivalry between Israel and Iran and possibly lead to tacit cooperation between the two nations once again.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Israel and Iran have been adversaries for more than 30 years. The 1979 Islamic revolution transformed cooperative Israeli-Iranian relations under the Shah into open hostility. However, even after the revolution, the animosity between the two countries was often tempered by pragmatism. Both Israel and Iran viewed Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a more serious threat to their respective national interests than each other. Some Israeli leaders also clung to the old "periphery doctrine" in which Persian Iran would serve as a counterweight to Israel's Arab neighbors.

This did not prevent Iran from opening a "second front" with Israel during its war against Iraq. Hostility toward Israel lessened Iran's isolation in the Arab world and enhanced its image as a force of "resistance" against Israeli and U.S. "imperialism." Nevertheless, Iran's antagonism toward Israel was mostly a distant affair conducted through third parties, especially Hizballah and Palestinian groups such as Hamas. And although Israel found Iran's anti-Israel ideology and regional activity worrying, it did not view Iran as its central security challenge.

However, over the last decade, Israel and Iran have come to view each other as direct rivals. This is largely due to Iran's development of long-range missiles, a potential nuclear weapons program, and geopolitical shifts that have strengthened Iran regionally from the Israeli (and Iranian) perspective. Many Israelis now view Iran as a direct and immediate danger because of its greater influence in areas bordering Israel, as demonstrated by the 2006 "proxy" war with Hizballah. The rise of the principlists and the Revolutionary Guards and Ahmadinejad's bellicose rhetoric has also intensified the ideological nature of

the rivalry. Ironically, both Iran and Israel view the United States as a power in decline, reinforcing a direct competition between the two regional powers.

The rise of popular regimes and the continued regional unrest following the 2011 Arab Spring are likely to have at this point an unpredictable effect on Iran's relations with the Arab world, but it is not likely to diminish Israel's threat perceptions of Iran or, perhaps depending on what happens in Syria, the Iranian regime's sense of self-confidence, however out of touch it may be with regional realities. To be sure, Iran's past use of its anti-Israel stance to undercut the legitimacy and popular support for authoritarian Arab rulers may resonate less as new Arab governments are likely to pursue their own populist policies less friendly to Israel and the United States. Yet even if Iran's populist outreach suffers lessened traction, it is still likely to try to use the resistance narrative to counter Israel. And Israel is likely to continue linking Iran to Arab actors on its borders, regardless of how political transitions in those countries unfold. Egypt's decision to open its border to Gaza, for example, raises concerns for Israel not only about Egypt's foreign policy direction but also about how it may increase Iranian influence on its borders through its ally Hamas.

The intensification of the Israeli-Iranian rivalry in recent years has serious consequences for U.S. interests in the Middle East. A future spark in this combustible region can result in a war involving not only Iran and Israel but also multiple countries, including the United States. Iran's possession of nuclear weapons could lead to a Middle East version of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The lack of direct communication between Iran and Israel could potentially lead to misinterpreted signals and confusion regarding each actor's intentions and red lines. As this study has shown, the Iranian regime's views of Israel are often shaped by ideology and a conspiratorial world view. Israel's perceptions of Iran are also influenced by its unique strategic culture and historical experiences. The potential for miscalculation by both sides in the event of conflict is thus a serious risk.

However, an Iranian-Israeli clash is not inevitable; the United States has the ability to help manage the strategic rivalry between the two regional powers. To do so, the U.S. government should continue

its policies of prevention and preparation. In the case of Israel, this means discouraging an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities while bolstering Israeli capabilities in preparation for a future where Iran has managed to acquire nuclear weapons. For Iran, this suggests, first, continuing policies to dissuade the Iranian regime from weaponizing its nuclear program while preparing to deter a nuclear-armed Iran in the future if such efforts fail.

U.S. Policies Toward Israel

With respect to managing Israel's rivalry with Iran to avoid a conflict, the main U.S. objectives center on assuring the Israelis that the United States is continuing to lead efforts to prevent an Iranian nuclear capability while dissuading Israel from launching its own military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. The harder question, however, is how to implement this policy given that U.S. leverage over Israel is often limited. In recent years, U.S. military assistance to Israel has been supplemented with additional military cooperation and equipment (particularly in the missile defense area) to bolster Israeli confidence and security in the face of growing anxiety about Iran (see Chapter Three). In addition to enhanced security cooperation, the United States also continues to be Israel's closest political ally at the United Nations, and President Obama has reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to support Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity despite this administration's active nonproliferation agenda. However, this extensive support has not always led to policies favored by Washington; Israeli settlement activity over U.S. objections is a notable example.

In the past, Israeli public opinion has served as a check on Israeli leaders pursuing policies viewed as too defiant against U.S. preferences because of how much Israelis value the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Yet today, such constraints are less clear as Israelis have developed a siege mentality in the wake of rocket attacks following the Lebanon and then Gaza withdrawals, as well as the flotilla incident with Turkey. Because Israelis believe that they will be blamed no matter what they do, more defiant positions are likely, even toward the United States.

The Egyptian revolution and the interim military regime's opening of the Gaza crossing and promotion of Fatah-Hamas reconciliation have heightened this sense of isolation. The result so far has been to increase Israeli cooperation with the United States in the security sphere but also resistance to U.S. efforts to broker peace with its Palestinian neighbors. Although negative Israeli views of President Obama may arguably exacerbate the situation, these broader strategic factors (including the U.S. need to focus on threats emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan as much as Iran) would likely create a degree of friction in U.S.-Israeli relations under any U.S. leadership.

Still, because of the close nature of U.S.-Israeli relations and the view among many in Israel's security community and the public that U.S. support for Israel is still critical, the United States has some ability to affect Israeli thinking and policies. Indeed, other than Israeli views of how well sabotage efforts are working, such as the Stuxnet computer attack against Iran's nuclear capabilities, U.S. positions are likely to have the most effect on Israeli positions toward a military strike option.

Public pressure against Israel, such as linking aid packages to policy shifts, is likely to backfire in the current environment where Israel's sense of isolation is pervasive, turning popular opinion against the United States and thus allowing for only more defiant positions among Israeli leaders. Instead, the United States can quietly attempt to affect Israeli policy toward Iran through stepped-up engagement and dialogue with targeted Israeli security elites in an effort to affect the internal debate under way regarding the utility of a military strike against Iran. Israel's former head of intelligence, Meir Dagan, made several public appearances after leaving his position, arguing against an Israeli military strike because of the unforeseen consequences, such as a broader regional war. But as Chapter Three suggested, the debate over a military strike has been ongoing within Israel's strategic community for some time. The United States has an interest in bolstering those voices in Israel arguing against this option, which would also negatively affect U.S. interests and make it more difficult to contain Iranian influence in the future. U.S. intelligence officials, for example, could privately support the assessments of such former Israeli intelligence officials as Dagan, continuing to underscore the dangers of this

course of action to both Israeli and U.S. interests. U.S.-sponsored intelligence and military seminars targeted at Israeli intelligence and military officials outlining U.S. concerns and risk assessments of military strike options could also help shape this internal debate. The currently robust military-to-military ties between U.S. and Israeli officials provide another useful channel to continue discussing this issue.

At the same time, U.S. officials should continue their efforts to bolster security cooperation and intelligence-sharing with Israel to both help prevent a nuclear-armed Iran and prepare for such a future. Making the extensive U.S.-Israeli security cooperation more known to the Israeli public may also help assuage their fears of isolation. U.S. policymakers can encourage Israeli officials and journalists to offer more coverage of frequent U.S. defense department visits and security agreements with their Israeli counterparts. Preparation for a future where efforts to prevent an Iranian bomb fail also includes better understanding the requirements for a deterrence regime between Iran and Israel. Continuing war games with Western and regional experts that develop and explore various conflict paths in such scenarios would be an important start in understanding how an Israeli-Iranian nuclear relationship might evolve.

Direct communication between Israelis and Iranians will also become necessary over time. Both sides will have an interest in managing and preventing nuclear conflict, despite their adversarial relationship. Such communication will not be possible at official levels in the immediate future but could start through unofficial, track two security dialogues among Israeli and Iranian security experts, sponsored by U.S. or European nongovernmental institutions (indeed, such dialogues are already occurring but should be expanded and better coordinated). These dialogues could eventually involve officials participating in an unofficial capacity depending on the regional political climate and the nature of the Iranian leadership.

U.S. Polices Toward Iran

The emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran is not a forgone conclusion. U.S. efforts at engaging and sanctioning Iran should continue, though they may not yield dramatic results. Polling suggests that public support in Iran for the nuclear program and even acquisition of nuclear weapons is strong despite sanctions.[1] On the other hand, the Iranian regime faces enormous internal and external pressures, including major divisions within the political system between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. Hence, the Iranian regime could still be dissuaded from weaponizing its nuclear program, though it is unlikely to stop uranium enrichment. Hence, U.S. efforts should be dedicated to keeping the Iranian nuclear program in a virtual stage, rather the trying to dissuade Iran from giving up its uranium enrichment cycle completely. The regime may not decide to take the final step in assembling nuclear weapons or declaring its nuclear status through testing or withdrawal from the NPT, but the U.S. government should be prepared for such an outcome. The United States should begin to review and perhaps revise its deterrence options faced with a nuclear-armed Iran.

In addition, the United States must also consider future scenarios in which the current Iranian regime is radically transformed. Despite its purported confidence, the regime is vulnerable to the same type of forces that have led to the Arab uprisings. Though the regime appears resilient, it faces numerous sociopolitical and economic challenges. There are several possible scenarios regarding Iran's future political system, including the demise of the Islamic Republic in favor of a completely militarized system or even a secular democracy. Each scenario has important implications for U.S. policy toward Iran and Israel. A secular Iranian democracy is less likely to be hostile toward the United States and Israel, whereas a militarized political system under the control of the Revolutionary Guards may view Israel with even greater hostility.

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[1]   Sara Beth Elson and Alireza Nader, *What Do Iranians Think? A Survey of Attitudes on the United States, the Nuclear Program, and the Economy,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, TR-910-OSD, 2011.

The almost excessive U.S. focus on the Iranian nuclear program has at times hurt overall U.S. policy toward Iran. Greater attention to other issues, such as human rights abuses in Iran, may signal to Iran's people, and its future government, that the United States views Iran as an important and consequential nation rather than as a mere problem to be solved.

Managing the Rivalry

The emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran entails many difficult choices and perhaps moments of deep crises; no country is likely to feel the effects of such developments as much as Israel. However, the United States possesses the ability to help restrain the Israeli-Iranian rivalry to prevent it from turning into a direct armed clash. U.S. policies focused on prevention and preparation will likely encounter tensions and trade-offs. For example, taking preemptive military strike options against Iran's nuclear facilities off the table may undermine U.S. efforts to reassure the Israelis that the United States views preventing a nuclear-armed Iran as a critical priority. Yet issuing such threats may encourage some in Israel to believe that the United States would support, or at least acquiesce in, an Israeli strike. Policies aimed at bolstering those voices within Israel who share a negative cost-benefit assessment on military strike options may help avoid such a development.

Furthermore, U.S. preparation to deter a nuclear-armed Iran could also signal to the Islamic Republic that its strategy toward the United States and its partners has been successful. Iran may believe that its policy of "resistance" in the face of international sanctions has demonstrated its emergence as the Middle East's greatest power, leaving it confident and more emboldened than ever before. U.S. "acceptance" of a nuclear-armed Iran could also be seen by Middle Eastern states as a green light for their own potential nuclear aspirations. To counter this perception, the United States needs to maintain and continue to strengthen the sanctions regime.

The history of Iranian-Israeli relations suggests that the two nations are not destined for perpetual conflict. And Iran's evolving soci-

ety and political system may contain the seeds for a better future. The challenge for the United States is crafting a policy that prevents nuclear weaponization and facilitates the emergence of a more democratic Iran, beholden not to the narrow interests of the regime but to the Iranian people. Such a shift would be the surest way to address Israeli fears and offer opportunities for the Israeli-Iranian relationship to normalize over time, moving back from the brink of conflict between rivals toward pragmatic cooperation between two regional powers.

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